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To Gertrude Battles Lane

While Friendship walks our human ways,
  And guards our fire on winter nights,
Still shall we render Allah praise,
  Who hath not ended the Delights.

THE LUCKY LAWRENCES

CHAPTER I

THE Lawrence family, although in the best sense of the word pioneers, had not come to the Golden West by means of covered wagons. They had left their Boston moorings, like the gentlefolk of means and leisure that they were, in the year of our Lord 1849, and had sailed elegantly for Rio, for Buenos Aires, and around the Horn. They had loitered in Valparaiso and in Lima for some weeks, taking things easily, in a leisurely day, and had in due time come up the stormy coast of California, and had dropped anchor in the opalescent harbor of peaceful Yerba Buena.

For San Francisco had been still familiarly known as Yerba Buena, then, and the blue waters of the bay had lapped the strand at Montgomery Street. The globe trotters, magnificent Philip Lawrence and his frail, Indian-shawled, pretty wife, had remained on the ship for a few days, for the settlement on shore promised small comfort for tourists. Thus they had enjoyed a safe view not only of the glorious harbor, strewn with green islands and ringed with eternal hills, but of the busy traffic between the Mexicans, Spanish, Chinese, and Japanese fishing smacks and trading boats that had put off from the shore and that were continually fussing and bobbing on the water like the coconut shells and orange peels the sailors threw overboard.

Early in their second week, however, they had been obliged to seek lodging ashore. This was for two reasons, one important, one ridiculous. The important reason was that an heir to the Lawrences was about to be born. The absurd reason was that some preposterous person had discovered gold, or had pretended to, at a place called Sutter Creek, and that everyone in Yerba Buena had promptly lost his senses.

Philip and Abigail Lawrence naturally did not lose their senses. They were rich anyway; they were above this undignified scramble for lucre. Philip had an income of three thousand a year, and Abigail's father owned five sailing vessels, including this very *Abby Baldwin* in which they had made their wonderful honeymoon trip.

But the sailors, and indeed the officials of the *Abby Baldwin,* had felt differently. They were not above acquiring fortunes, and they had instantly deserted the ship and made for the gold region. Philip and his wife had been shocked to find their remonstrances unheeded; they had indeed been forced to extreme measures. They had assured the rebels that this was mutiny, and would be reported as such in Boston upon their return. They had threatened an entire stoppage of wages. "By God, I mean this, men!" Philip had said hotly. He had been only twenty-three, but he had inherited the pride of the Lawrences.

Abigail, his wife, had trembled in fear and admiration at these words, but the men, poor deluded fools, had merely laughed. They had laughed at the idea of losing sixteen good dollars a month. The rumor of gold, spreading like prairie fire between breakfast and the noon dinner, had found the ship emptied by sunset. Philip and Abigail had signaled a Chinese crab catcher, and in his little shallop with stained brown sails he had rowed them and their carpet bags ashore.

They had felt affronted and bewildered, and Abigail very faint. But she had remembered that this was the very first thing to go wrong, on all this wonderful trip. And pale and heroic and smiling, she had said to Philip that within three days the men would be back, and that then they—Philip and herself—would be able to make pretty stiff terms with them.

They had gone to "the Frenchwoman's," a quaint-looking adobe house on a hill, with an upper balcony and shutters. There were no windows, but there were tents of mosquito netting over the bed, and the bare floors were clean. Downstairs was merely a level of dim arcades, earthen-floored and smelling of spilled wine, where men lounged on benches, and where the Frenchwoman herself tended the bar. But the upstairs room had been comfortable enough, and Abigail had put the daguerreotype of her mother—a hook-nosed, ringleted woman in flowing striped silks—on the table, and had eaten a shore meal of fish stew, dumplings, fresh soft black figs, sour bread, and thin wine, with some appetite.

This would do for the present, she had said. But one could not live quite like a savage, after all, and immediately after breakfast to-morrow Philip must find a really nice place, even if he had to buy it, and a good plain servant, and a nurse. If not, then they would have to go back to the ship.

So much for Philip's benefit. But when he had gone out after supper, to walk about a little on the uneven hilly streets and listen to the cursing, shouting, and singing of the strangely mixed population, and watch the card games, the drinking, and the fights, Abigail had felt very low-spirited indeed, and had cried a little, secretly, into the big hard French pillow. They had been eleven months getting so far, and the baby was due in a few weeks' time. Perhaps it would be weeks before they could get a crew on the *Abby Baldwin.*

Philip had returned flushed, distressed, and annoyed from his search the next morning; he had returned flushed, distressed, and increasingly annoyed from the searches of the following days. The Frenchwoman's was not only the best, it appeared to be the only possible place for Abigail to stay, and to contemplate a confinement there, with the noise and drinking and the smell of wine below stairs, and with nobody but whiskered old Madame Bouvier to attend her, was madness. Desperate, Philip had rented a spanking team and a loose-wheeled buggy and had begun to drive about the adjoining country looking for shelter.

For it had become obvious now that the crew was not going to return to the *Abby Baldwin*. The ship swung rotting at her anchor, in a dismal company of other deserted vessels, and the sun beat down upon their empty decks week in and week out, while the hides, coffee, and rope packed beneath slowly decayed. No vessels had been sailing out through the Golden Gate in these days, and when covered caravans had crawled slowly westward they rarely had come as far as Yerba Buena.

Abigail had covered passionate pages with the story of their adventures, none the less, and had put the letters into the canvas flap of her trunk, under the pasted picture of the little girl with the rope of roses. Some day they would get home again, Philip, she, and the baby, and what a story they would have to tell!

Meanwhile, fifty miles southeast of foggy Yerba Buena, they had found refuge on a rancho. It was managed by a widow, one Señora Castellazo, who lived farther south in another hacienda, and was willing to rent this one to the strangers. A four-square adobe building of four empty rooms, shaded magnificently by natural oaks, and by a plantation of beeches, gums, cottonwoods, figs, and peppers, it had contained no furnishings whatsoever when the Lawrences had moved in.

But many trips up to the *Abby Baldwin* had pretty well transformed the dismal place. Philip, breathlessly grateful that somehow, with the aid of a Mormon doctor from Benicia and the care of two stolid, wall-eyed Mexican women, Abigail had actually brought forth a first-born daughter, had made no complaints. He had had carted down wagon loads of chairs, carpets, china, bed linen, books—all the personal possessions of himself and his bride.

A bride! Poor Abigail had laughed forlornly on the first anniversary of her wedding day. It had found her weak and weary, stretched on a mattress on the floor of one of the cool rooms, with a burning August day hammering away at the spread level acres of the rancho outside. Beside her had been Annie Sarah.

The blue mountains had been swimming in hot mist that day, and the smell of the stables, of the cow sheds, of the kitchen where onions, oil, and tomatoes were lustily cooking, had almost suffocated the New England wife. They had brought her in hot dusky grapes, and hot dusty figs, and warm wine, and finally goat's milk, to solace her in her ordeal. Except for that, neither Mexican woman had volunteered anything. They had watched the frightened, doubtful, breathless struggle apathetically, until their oily brown hands had actually grasped Annie Sarah. After that they had seemed capable enough.

Anyway, it had been gotten over, somehow, and Abigail had been free to cry a little, thinking of her room at home in an orderly, shaded Massachusetts village, with Ma's lavender-scented linen on the smooth bed, roses in a green glass vase on the bureau, and the lace curtains—exquisitely mangled by Mis' Cutter, who worked 'round for her board—blowing softly in and out of the opened upstairs windows. Lilacs, trembling grass, and Grandpa's grave in the graveyard, and doughnuts and currant jelly—oh, dear!

Abigail had shut her eyes upon the distempered plastered walls of the barnlike adobe room, and had tried to shut ears, nose, heart, and brain as well.

As soon as the baby and the mother were well upon the road to normal living, Philip and Abigail had seriously discussed going home. They had kept a sharp eye on all the vessels that came in the Gate, and Philip had gone up to the city at least once a week to see what the chances were.

Then old Señora Castellazo had died, and her sons had wished to dispose of the Santa Clara hacienda. Four hundred acres for nine hundred dollars. Philip had considered it a wise investment. There was fruit—some fruit—there already, there were sheep and cattle included in the sale price. If figs and grapes would grow there, why not other fruits—peaches and pears?

He would take his wife and daughter back to New England, he promised, on the first suitable ship; it would be a long hard trip for a woman with a baby, but the journey across the plains would be worse, and there was no further hope of the *Abby Baldwin*. Philip and Abigail had hoped nervously that her father, old Cap'n Baldwin, would not blame them for the catastrophe of a good ship's loss. The sailors and the mate were certainly the ones to blame, but they were scattered dear knows where by this time, and Massachusetts justice would find it difficult to punish them.

Philip had looked the ground over pretty thoroughly, he had told his wife. He had considered San Francisco, but it had seemed to him inaccessible, unless some day there were to be built a railroad from New York, which need not at the moment be considered. And he had examined the coast, but the coast was cold and windy.

No, upon consideration it had seemed to Philip that this sunshiny, sheltered flat region, well inland, was the coming district, and that by holding onto this property ten years, fifteen years, he and Abigail could not fail to be among the prosperous pioneers of the new world. Philip was one of the men who had shot dead the gold craze with an epigram: "a flash in the pan."

Meanwhile Fanny Lucy had been born.

"Look here, young lady, aren't there any boys where you came from?" Philip had said, half serious, half teasing, as he held his second daughter in his arms. Abigail had looked at him anxiously. But he had not been really angry.

Only it had been rather trying that a fine ship had left for South America and Eastern ports on the very next day. She had delayed so long in San Francisco Harbor that Philip and Abigail had really hoped to be able to sail on her. But Fanny Lucy had delayed, too, and had unconsciously affected her parents' destinies thereby.

For letters had gone to Boston on that ship, and letters, four months later, somehow had struggled overland in answer. The respective families of Abigail and Philip had been perfectly delighted at their venture, and wrote that they were certainly envious of the dwellers in a country where there was no snow, no thunderstorms, and no poverty. They said they were having a terrible winter, and that Abigail's father had shut himself up in the attic for nine days after hearing of the fate of the *Abby Baldwin,* and that Mrs. Baldwin and Minnie had had to carry his meals up and leave them on the middle step.

Philip's brother Silas and Abigail's brother Adoniram had been so fired with enthusiasm that they had sold out their interest in the family shoe business, and were now on their way to St. Joe, hoping to join a caravan, and Philip's aged mother, a blue-nosed, crape-clad widow of forty-seven who was sinking rapidly to the grave, as her years beseemed, had sent a message to the effect that she was coming too, as soon as she could get rid of Sam's place.

This had somewhat flattered, and somewhat dashed, the Western branch of the family, but they had been more pleased than otherwise, and had at once assumed the complacency of those whose judgment is justified. Abigail had spent long inactive weeks before the birth of her fourth child in writing glowing accounts of her new life to the family at home. She wanted fuchsia plants, a dogwood tree, and her share of the Canton set. She and Philip were going to build a really nice frame house, with bay windows, a bathroom, and a cupola. Everything they touched prospered; people called them "the Lucky Lawrences."

Sitting hoop-skirted and ringleted on the shady north side of the hacienda, dipping her feathered quill into the china bottle of ink that had come all the way from England, Abby Lawrence had not been able to refrain from a little boasting.

> Phil, who seems to know everything [she had written], found some pear branches making a Crate for Coconuts, which came in on old *Lady Adams* four years ago, when I got my Muslin and the Crockery and Tinware, at Monte Rey. Phil planted the Wretched canes, grafting them to young trees, and they have grown Amazingly in this Magick climate. The Prices our pears demand are I do assure you beyond belief, and our Sheep and Cattle likewise, so that the Boys will find they have come to a Land of Plenty!
>
> My Girls are fat and pretty, you would think Fanny sweet in the Boots [she further wrote]. My Boy liv'd but three months, when he had a Colick. It is a grief to lose them. Nature would not be denied and I own I wept when they laid my sweet Boy in the grave for though young he had fine spirit, and would have made a Good Man.

The four hundred acres became four thousand acres, and the fifteen head of cattle that many hundred head. Brothers, cousins, old mother, old father—they flourished and waxed fat. Abigail bore eight daughters and another son, and the girls all married, during the late Sixties and early Seventies, in a land in which women were still rare and prized.

San Francisco grew like a mushroom, and Philip might have opened a thousand doors to great wealth, had he been a man to see. But he closed one after the other with his own hand, and went blindly on in an infatuation of satisfaction with his rolling acres, his miles of fruit trees, the growing family over which he ruled supreme.

Some of the girls went East when they married, some lived in San Francisco or Stockton, some died. It was not a salubrious day for pioneer women, with one out of every seven dying in childbirth. Some were poor, opening boarding houses, scrimping in lonely crossroad villages.

But no one of them ever forgot that she was a Lucky Lawrence, and belonged to a distinguished New England family. They hoarded mahogany and lace and yellowed old glass berry bowls; they sent back to Boston for faded primitive paintings; they talked incessantly of the significant fact that the Lawrences had not come to California as pioneers—oh, dear no! Mother Lawrence had come to San Francisco Harbor on her wedding trip, on one of Grandfather Baldwin's own trading ships.

The one son, Patterson Lawrence, duly married, too, and lived in the house with which his parents had replaced the old adobe hacienda. The hacienda was used as a grain house, a place for hides and ropes and farm machinery. The new house stood six hundred feet nearer the highway, and was reached by a long lane of poplars and eucalyptus.

Abigail, and after her her daughter-in-law, in their fervor to encourage shade in that hot, dry country, planted everything upon which they could put their hands, close to the house. They did not foresee that the pampas grass and the verbena trees, the peppers and roses and evergreens, would grow closer, thicker, darker every year. Eventually the pretentious old frame building, with its scallops of mill work and its bay windows, its cupola and balustraded roof, was caught tightly in dusty, heavy leafage, and the garden filled with mossy, slippery patches where even in summer no light crept in on the sickly grass.

The house, built in the early Seventies, had three wide steps in front, coming up from the path, and a shallow veranda upon which bay windows, on either side of the door, protruded. The door itself was wide, and made wider by the rectangles of colored glass that framed it. In the door were panels of dark red glass, with woodland scenes, deer, willow trees, bridges, etched upon them in white.

There were more deer in the garden, iron deer, and arbors, summer houses, and trellises. The brick paths wound into leafy jungles, and the old porter bottles that had been inverted to edge them were in many places broken and displaced by crowding roots. For thirty years the House of Lawrence had been in eclipse, and the garden showed it.

The baronial acres had long melted away; the sleepy, prosperous town of Clippersville was situated where the Castellazo bull ring had once stood, and only the four acres surrounding the house and a small farm some miles away, down toward the marshes, remained of the ancestral glory to the Lucky Lawrences. Acre by acre old Philip Lawrence and his son Patterson had watched their fortunes decline; the old pioneer of the Yerba Buena days lived to see the end of the century, and the end of his own prosperity, and died, leaving what remained in hands even less capable than his own.

For Patterson Lawrence was a poet, who lived merely to gather worthless old books about him, to dream over the painstaking penning of insignificant essays, which were rarely printed and for which he was never paid. He read papers to infant Chambers of Commerce from Sacramento to Riverside, comparing California to Athens, and hymning poppies, fog, Junipero Serra, and sea gulls in countless verses all beginning with rapturous praise of the Golden State.

At forty he married a poet's daughter, who had been precariously existing for all her sixteen years upon bread, water, and the *Sonnets from the Portuguese,* in a shanty on Rincon Hill. Editha, before her early death, brought to the House of Lawrence two sons and three daughters. Sixteen when she married, ten years later, when Ariel was born, she quietly, happily expired, to music, as it were.

For Patterson had been reading poetry to her, the four older children, by some miracle, quiet and occupied down by the creek, and Ariel in her mother's arms taking a fourth-day view of life, when death came.

"She looks as if she were listening, Pat! She's going to be a great poet, and make all our fortunes!" Editha had said. And one minute later she had slipped away, leaving the prophecy to gild little Ariel's childhood.

Little Phil, Gail, Edith, Sam were all exactly alike. They all had the Lawrence characteristics: clear colorless brown skins, tawny hair, blue eyes, black lashes, and large mouths. But Ariel was true blonde, ethereal, fairy-like, from the very beginning.

The widowed elderly father did the best he could for them all until his oldest son was nearly eighteen and Gail a capable, bustling house manager two years younger. Then the big guns began to boom across the water, the service flags flashed in answer upon many a quiet flag pole in Clippersville, and Patterson Lawrence, fifty-eight years old, put a copy of Keats in one pocket and a copy of Shelley in the other and hurried off to die of flu in overcrowded Washington, just as sure as his loyal children were sure that he was helping his country and doing the patriotic thing.

Then Phil and Gail had to shoulder the burden. Gail Lawrence was supremely the girl for the job. She was squarely built, womanly at sixteen, brimming with interests, activities, ambitions, and enthusiasms.

"Gail," said Edith solemnly, looking up from *Barchester Towers,* "thinks that this life is a story, and that she is writing it!"

"Well, we're poor enough to be heroines!" Gail answered sturdily.

For by this time the once lucky Lawrences had almost no money. The ranch three miles back in Stanislaus was rented for something less than three hundred a year, and taxes were always over two hundred, so there was no comfort there. Phil had all but finished high school, and all the friends, relatives, and neighbors said that certainly a bright fine boy like that ought to complete his course. But as Phil and Gail quite simply agreed, meals were more important than education. So Phil stopped his schooling and went to work at the Iron Works, and Gail, upon being offered a job in the public library, accepted it gratefully.

They were proud of themselves, and of their responsibility, and all Clippersville applauded them. They scrambled along in the disreputable old house very happily; they were always laughing, singing, going on picnics; they were passionately devoted to each other, and everyone was sure that they would get along splendidly. Were they not the last of the Lucky Lawrences?

Surest of all was Gail, the resolute, undaunted, optimistic mother and sister, cook, nurse, and lawmaker in one. Life had been indeed a story to Gail, for a few years, and she had turned a fresh page eagerly every day. She and Edith were going to marry delightful men, and Phil should marry, too. And Sammy should live in Edith's house and Ariel in Gail's, and Ariel should write wonderful poetry. There would be plenty of money for everything, as there always had been . . . soon.

But somehow it had not worked out that way. Gail had grown a little more sober, a little thinner, as the years had slipped by; they had all grown shabbier. Even to her, poverty began to seem a serious matter.

Phil, to her concern, had never quite seen the joke of being poor and being orphaned. He had always been brief, worried, and unresponsive when Gail had tried to drag him into her dreams. And Edith hated poverty too; it hurt her pride. She had grown quieter, bookish, intellectual, something of a recluse.

Sammy had done nothing except slide through his shoes and get "D minus" marks in his studies. And Ariel was completely spoiled. They had all spoiled the shy, thistledown-headed little girl, with a hoarse boy's voice, that she had been when her father had died. They had all hailed her as a poet before she could fairly write. She did write poetry, and that was enough for Clippersville. Clippersville was not critical. The *Challenge* published everything Ariel wrote. And Ariel was discontented, proud, and unmanageable, and would not go to school without constant urging, and under constant protest.

Altogether, the outlook was discouraging, and promised to grow more so. There were moments when even Gail could not quite believe in the luck of the Lawrences.

CHAPTER II

HER twenty-third birthday found Gail a quick-witted, eager, capable girl, secretly a little bit scared and doubtful, but outwardly gay, irresponsible, and pleasant to look at—like all the Lawrences. Even the boys never seemed to go through lumpy or spotty phases, but were clean-skinned and bright-eyed through boyhood as through babyhood. The older four had tawny thick hair, which had tumbled all over their heads as children, but which on occasions could be made to take more fitting positions.

Phil's was closely cropped; Edith wore hers wound about her young head in severe braids. Sam's was often a disheveled scandal, and Gail's not much better. But Gail's was the waviest, the brightest, the thickest.

These four had blue eyes, thick black lashes, heavy eyebrows, and square-fingered hands. The Lawrence hands were different from any other hands in Clippersville. The Lawrences stood on their feet peculiarly too, braced like young blooded horses at stance, their manes thrown back, the whites of their eyes showing.

Ariel was different: frail, pink-cheeked, and cream-skinned, with frightened big hazel eyes and a small mouth. Ariel's hair was corn-silk gold, and she never stood anywhere at all; she floated or drifted or slipped through life.

Phil worked in the Iron Works for eighty dollars a month, Gail was paid half that monthly for a seven-day week in the public library, Edith made thirty dollars a month as assistant in the book department of Müller's big store, Sammy was supplementing his school career at nineteen with eager labors as errand boy and general office help on the *Challenge,* and Ariel was supposed to be in high school. Ariel was now a fairylike seventeen.

And Gail was twenty-three. She had presents at the breakfast table in the good old Lawrence fashion. Nobody knew where they came from, or who paid for them, but the Lawrences always managed to give each other presents on anniversaries. Phil rather half-heartedly gave her a book, admitting that Edith had suggested it, bought it, and collected from him the money. Edith gave her silver slippers, scissors, two packs of small playing cards for evening solitaire, a Dedham bowl for Gail's favorite meal of hot bread and milk, and two pairs of service-wear stockings. All these were daintily wrapped and tied in Edith's own way, and Gail, swallowing coffee and buttering toast, spent her whole breakfast time in protesting gratitude.

Ariel gave her a silver spoon to go with the bowl, fending off Gail's kiss ungraciously, and muttering that Edith had made her do it. She, Ariel, would give Gail something "decent," she mumbled resentfully in her odd boy's voice, if she ever had a cent of her own. Gail's joyous laugh had a pang under it; Ariel had become expert in causing that pang of late.

Sammy's gift was a pair of bright new rubber overshoes; this was April in California. There would be no rain until November.

"Well, gee, Bonners' had a sale, and I di'n' know whatjer wanted!" Sam said confusedly when they all laughed. Gail kissed him, too, with the motherly tender kiss the little boy had never missed.

Then she and Edith rushed the breakfast paraphernalia into the sink; big plates underneath the pyramid that rose through smaller plates, saucers, and bowls to cups and glasses. Ariel was off to school, Phil had disappeared; Sammy had gone first of all. The two girls scrambled through the necessary kitchen work with a speed born of long practice.

"We need soap, Gail."

"Yes, and—what else was it? . . . Cornstarch."

"Shall I stop for them?"

"I'm going to leave this pot. Put that oatmeal spoon in it to soak. No use——"

"Through over there? I'm going to pull down this shade."

"Go ahead!"

The big kitchen was shaded, was in order. The cold water faucet dribbled suddenly, audibly, in the silence, as Gail and Edith, breathless and hot, paused at the hall door. Edith crossed the splintery floor to turn off the tap.

There were islands of worn, dark-brown linoleum on the floor, but they had retreated into the unused corners. The walls were painted a dark blue, stained and streaked with the distillation of the meals of sixty-five long years. The old house had settled a little, as if annoyed, in the great earthquake, and the kitchen floor ever since had run downhill toward the pantry door which, opening outward, had to be dragged up with some force, like a ship's door in a slight list. The Lawrence girls were still occasionally cooking on the great French range that measured twelve feet by six. Its massive iron top was pierced only once, for the graded rings of a plate; two hours of firing barely warmed it. But gas had been brought into the house at about the time of their father's marriage, and on one end of the range was a three-burner stove and a portable oven, where most of the family's meals were prepared.

On this birthday morning Gail and Edith went upstairs, passing the open front door on their way. They hesitated a minute, looking into the jungle of garden. The path to the gate was so overgrown now that the front door could not be used; this morning they saw that the hawthorn tree was beginning to blossom, and that the bare ends of the lilac branches were pluming themselves with purple. There was a hush of spring in the garden, green grass, contraband daisies, and a burst of untidy bridal wreath down by the old fence.

"Look at the pear tree, Gail!"

"Doesn't it just take your breath away?"

They shut the door and went upstairs, Gail saying of the unmade beds, "Let's flap 'em."

Edith's face clouded a little. She hated compromise and slovenliness; she hated the hard conditions of her life that made some truce with them necessary. The clock on the landing struck once, for the half hour after eight; she was due at the department store, and Gail at the library, at nine.

"We'll have to," she conceded briefly, sighing.

"I'll bet you they flap 'em in the most expensive hotels!" Gail stated dauntlessly as they began a brisk making of beds, sweeping the covers, blankets, and sheets smoothly into place without releasing them at the foot, without that refreshing tearing open, shaking, and turning that was balm to Edith's soul.

"You naturally would be familiar with the routine at the Biltmore!" Edith observed in her demure little way.

The other girl laughed joyously.

"I'm mad about my scissors; I'm mad about my slippers," she said, arranging her new possessions admiringly upon a dismal old square bureau with a brown marble slab on top. "I don't see how you did it!"

"Oh, it was nothing!" Edith said.

"I shouldn't have worn my office dress to breakfast," the older sister now observed ruefully, glancing at her cuffs.

"I don't see why you do," Edith answered, with a faint accent on the last syllable. She herself was changing from a kitchen slip-on to her store costume of dark dotted silk. She had brushed her orderly braids, washed her hands, scented them with her Christmas violet water. Gail was heated from domestic labors, her face looked pale with heat, her rich curly hair, brighter than Edith's, was tousled.

She got a bottle of some cleaning extract, and began to dabble at spots on her cuff and on her skirt close to the hem.

"Egg!" she said disgustedly. Her glance approved of Edith. "That looks better on you than it ever did on Mary Tevis," she observed.

Edith studied herself in the mirror dispassionately.

"I never would have gotten it," she said. "I don't like dots. But it certainly has come in usefully."

"The worst of Mary Tevis is, she'll give you a bunch of things one time, and then forget you for seven years!" Gail, having made herself comparatively presentable, said briskly, "Now, when I'm rich, I shall have a list of girls—— Damn such a shoe lace!"

"Abigail, you ought not say that."

"I know I oughtn't. But look at it!"

"You'll get Ariel saying it."

Gail mended her lace, looked up with a flushed face.

"Didn't you think Ariel was beautiful at breakfast, Ede?"

"Oh, yes, she really is."

"Do you think—this may all be my imagination—but do you think she's interested in boys, already?"

Their eyes flashed together consciously.

"Oh, yes, I know she is!" Edith answered unhesitatingly.

"She's only seventeen!"

"Well," said Edith, who combined a recluse's sensitiveness and temperament with an occasional flash of daring, "I was fond of the boys at sixteen."

Edith, pretty as she was, had never had a beau, and Gail knew it. But it was the unwritten law of sisterhood not to say so.

Gail merely said perfunctorily, "Oh, well, yes, so was I!" She waved a handkerchief about herself to dispel the stifling smell of the cleaning fluid. "But, Edith," she pursued, "there seems to be something—different, in the way Ariel is."

The younger sister's quick keen gaze was lifted; Edith's serious look met Gail's consciously.

"Secretive," she offered.

"Well! Well, yes," Gail answered on a nervous laugh.

"Ariel will get married before either one of us, because we happen to be a little more particular!" Edith pronounced, with her little air of old-maidish snobbery. When Edith said things like that it vaguely irritated Gail.

But almost immediately, walking down the spring street, the younger sister was sweet again.

"Gail, dear, you don't know what I'd do for your birthday, if I could."

"I don't know what more you could do than you do do, Ede."

"Oh, everything, darling! Frocks, and a car, and the country club——"

"If Sam finds that check, and Ariel behaves herself and graduates, and Phil isn't in love with Mrs. Cass," Gail said, "I shan't have a worry in the world!"

"Don't worry," Edith pleaded, worried herself.

"Oh, I won't!" But Gail sounded anxious, sounded older than her twenty-three years, as she left Edith at Montalvo Boulevard, and turned up the Calle to the Plaza, where the library stood.

Miss Foster was in the coat room, battling with a nosebleed.

"What makes me anxious is, my father used to have them so terribly before he died," Miss Foster said, mopping and sniffing. Gail got the big clock key from the reading room and pressed its coldness to her associate's bent spine. "You certainly are kind," the pale little sufferer kept murmuring. They went out to the desk together.

"Heavenly day!" Gail said to Francis Wilcox, the librarian.

"Fine what about those slips?" Mr. Wilcox answered without punctuation.

"They're here."

The day had begun. Gail pinned paper cuffs over her sleeves, walking, as she pinned the last one, to the big windows, whose shades she raised. She unhasped the street door, and the usual waiting group of stragglers came in. Miss Foster clamped the newspapers into their holders; little Rose Cahill wheeled wire crates full of books to the different cases, and Gail took them from the barrows and filed them away in their places. The dim big rooms saw various noiseless activities afoot; Rose whispered to Gail, Gail went silently past the tables and spoke to Mr. Wilcox.

Outside the high, cool windows the spring day was burgeoning over Clippersville. Motor horns sounded in the tree-shaded street, the faces of early patrons were damp with heat.

Presently Gail was perched high at the desk, taking books from the hands that extended them, stamping dates, putting slips into paper envelopes, tossing books into wire crates behind her. Sometimes she looked sharply at a date, compared it to some other entry. Often she answered a whispered question.

"I haven't read it, Mrs. Larabee. But my brother Sam read it, and he says it's fine. It's a sort of adventure book, you know."

Or, "Did you look among the biographies? I believe it would be there rather than in the histories."

Opposite her, on the high white wall, hung portraits of Lincoln, Carnegie, and Patterson Lawrence. Gail's father had been Clippersville's one literary light so far, and Clippersville honored him. Patterson, only son of Lucky Philip Lawrence.

Every day some woman said admiringly to Gail: "Do you Lawrences read every book that's printed?"

And every day it gave Gail pleasure to answer, with her own joyous laugh, "Well, not *quite!* But with Edith in Müller's, you know, bringing home all the new books, and with me in here, bringing home all the old, we really do get a look at most of them!"

Sometimes the interrogator added, "Your little sister—does she go on writing poetry?"

But of late years this had given Gail no particular pleasure. As a matter of fact, she read too much good poetry to think Ariel's good any more. It was pretty, and it was an amusement for Ariel to write it—but it was not poetry. Gail would not hint this, even to Phil or Edith, but it made her rather unhappy. She kept hoping that some day Ariel would suddenly begin to write better verse. Darling little Ariel.

Gail thought of her youngest sister this morning, as the dreamy dim hours in the library began to slip by. Ariel was less fitted than any of the other Lawrences for the struggle of life. She was only an innocent, bewildered child.

She had wanted to give Gail something handsomer than the spoon, the darling! Gail felt her heart contract with love and pain as she remembered the scene at the birthday breakfast table. Ariel had no money, except what Phil or Gail sometimes gave her, poor kid! She had probably charged the spoon to Phil's account at Müller's.

She wanted—in fact all of them wanted—leisure and beauty and luxury in life. Ariel seemed to want it more than the others, somehow, or in some indefinably different way. She seemed made for beautiful gardens, beautiful porches, spacious, luxurious rooms. She pined, she drooped, in the atmosphere of poverty, griminess, dullness.

Even as a child, Ariel had not been happy, exactly. She had always been a whimsical, moody child, at one moment deliciously amusing and fantastic, at another snappy, gloomy, and incomprehensible. And all these things had grown on her, so that now the rest of the family hardly knew how to manage her sometimes. She would be outrageous, insulting, intolerant, and then she would suddenly change, and begin to laugh and cry together, helplessly, and perhaps would be sick, and have to be put to bed. And when loving, reproachful Edith and loving, unreproachful Gail were sponging off her pitifully pale little face, and pushing the wet strings of golden hair from her forehead, she would be penitent, affectionate—their darling baby Ariel once more.

Thinking of all this, Gail abstractedly stamped and scribbled, and tossed the books about. When the whistles droned noon, and a sudden responsive pang of hunger stabbed her, she put on her blue hat and walked up the street to Müller's, to meet Edith.

The book department was on the main floor, behind the jewelry counters, tucked away in the stairway angle. It was not very large, but a steady current of the new books ran through it, and a little side current diverged through Edith's hands into the Lawrence house. All the Lawrences were accustomed to reading books in their paper jackets, with every regard for spotting or marking. A general fear of injuring Müller's books and having to pay for them prevailed.

Edith, still neat, cool, and clean, lifted an ecstatic look to Gail as she decorously finished the sale of seven novels to a passing motorist. The girls idolized and idealized each other, and were proud of their friendship. All the passion of the younger sister's rather cold nature was in the look; this was one of her awaited moments every day, when her flushed, adored, tousled Gail came in and they went to lunch together.

They linked hands, walking along the familiar blocks of the Calle, under the trees.

"Heavens, I'm glad it's spring!" Gail said, with characteristic vehemence.

"I love you, Gail," Edith said, mildly.

They went in at the side door to the home kitchen, and let up the shade, and began their preparations for lunch. The kettle was boiling over a bead of gas, for Ariel always came in promptly at twelve, and had her lunch and was gone before the older girls arrived. It was understood that the older sisters must find a hot kettle.

Edith put soft fresh rolls on a plate, and Gail made tea.

"I know what I'm going to have," said Gail, at the safe. "These beans, and the stewed onions, and an egg, sort of squizzled together."

"I'm going to have bread and honey," Edith declared.

"And a boiled egg, Ede?"

"Maybe. Put it in the kettle."

"Were you counting on these beans for dinner, Ede?"

"No. I haven't an idea for dinner!"

Edith sat wearily, luxuriously, over her rolls, honey, and tea, her eyes absent, her hand idly stirring the cup.

"Gail, I was thinking that we ought to learn some more poetry, as we do the beds. 'Member how we used to rattle it off, when we were little girls?"

"Oh, do I? 'The Lady of Shalott' and 'Grandmother's Story of Bunker Hill' and 'The Lost Leader' and James Whitcomb Riley——"

"We ought to do it again! It was lots of fun."

"We could probably learn one a day, now."

"Short ones, we could, like Emily Dickinson's and Wordsworth's sonnets. And Francis Thompson——"

"There's a poem of Miss Guiney's about meadows —'deep-tressed meadows'—that I'd like to learn," Gail said musingly in a long silence.

The big shabby kitchen, with its rusty dim range and splintered floor, was full of pleasant shadiness in the hot spring nooning. The big house above it, about it, was very still. Not a bird moved in the heavy lush foliage about the door, not a leaf fluttered.

"I'd like to learn Noyes's 'Highwayman,' and some of Hodgson's poems," Edith said. " 'Eve' and 'The Old Bull.' "

"Ede, do you suppose things'll ever be any easier for us? Do you suppose we'll have clothes and a car, some day, and belong to a country club?"

Edith pondered it.

"I—don't really—know," she said at last hesitatingly, as if she might with more time have given a definite answer.

"I mean," Gail fumbled along wistfully, "poor people—people who have a hard start—*do.*"

"Yes, I know they do!"

"Edith, I could stand anything for myself. But it worries me—about Phil and Ariel."

"I don't think Phil minds being poor so much—not since he's been going with Lily Cass," Edith offered.

"Well, I think I want him to mind! I don't think Phil is ambitious," Gail countered, with an anxious little laugh.

"Maybe we're fooling ourselves," Edith said, suddenly gloomy. "Maybe our luck's changed."

"Fooling ourselves?"

"Yes. Do you think we are?"

"I don't think I quite understand you," Gail said uncomfortably, biting into a cracker so loaded with home-made blackberry jam that it dripped rich red sweetness between her fingers.

"Oh, yes you do!" Edith answered with a laugh.

"You mean," Gail said soberly, after a space, "that we aren't getting anywhere?"

"Well, are we?" Edith was clearing away the plates and spoons of their meal; she turned from the sink, where the breakfast dishes were still soaking, to regard her sister steadily.

"We are stuck in Clippersville," she summarized it. "Nobody knows we're alive. We're not in debt because the doctors and dentists won't send us bills —but we ought to be. We haven't any clothes, any social standing——"

"Oh, we have that, Ede!"

"Well, if we have, if we are the Lucky Lawrences, if we *were* one of the most important families in California, once, what are we now? Who's going to marry us? Who is there here for us to marry, anyway? What's to prevent our living on and on here, old maids, scraping along as best we can—Phil marrying that horrible Mrs. Cass, Sam getting a job somewhere and going away, Ariel—committing suicide, I suppose——"

"Oh, Edith, Edith!" Gail protested horrified. "Don't talk like that! You're blue. You're just tired to-day, or it's spring, or something! Why, darling, nobody knows where changes are coming from, or when. We're having our hard times now instead of later, that's all! We'll have dresses and country clubs and trips and—and fun, theaters, I mean, and everything, one of these days!"

Edith's grave, intellectual face was doubtful.

"You're twenty-three," she suggested significantly.

"And I could be married and have a nice fat baby by the time I was twenty-five!" Gail insisted hardily over a little interior pang.

"I don't think I mind for myself; I mind for you," Edith said as they walked back to work, down the tree-shaded Calle. "You ought to be having good times. You ought to be dancing, and going to little restaurants, and—and everything."

"And so ought you!" Gail answered cheerfully, although she felt a knife in her heart.

"Oh, I——!" Edith dismissed herself lightly, and immediately fell into that silly strain for which Gail could find no better expression than "old maidy." "I have a feeling," Edith went on complacently, "that I will meet my husband and be married to him all in a very short time. You know that fortune teller that was at Mabel's——"

"I wish she wouldn't talk that way!" Gail thought, suddenly hot, irritable, and discouraged.

But she had another moment of affection for Edith when they parted, and when her little shabby, conscientious sister said reassuringly, "I'll think up a grand dinner, and buy everything we need, so don't have it on your mind, Gail! Unless—" Edith, who was not a natural-born cook, as Gail was, added, "unless I need you on a gravy, or something!"

They alternated getting dinners, and to-night was Edith's turn.

Gail felt weary and discouraged as she went on her way. The long afternoon in the library dragged. She felt bored. A sense of injustice oppressed her. Twenty-three—and she might just as well have been fifty-three.

She turned the pages of a moving-picture magazine lying on the counter beside her. Pages upon pages of beautiful girls—girls who were having all the fun of dressing up, of playing parts, of dashing about in enchanting costumes to beaches, to clubs, to luncheons on yachts. Girls who were driving their own magnificent cars, signing big contracts, being admired, followed, envied, drinking deep of the cup of beauty and youth and self-expression.

Her blue eyes somber in the round face that was more than ordinarily pale to-day, and faintly powdered with golden freckles, Gail studied the pages before her. She drew the thick, bushy dark Lawrence eyebrows together.

> Honey Honeywell [she read], Hollywood's baby comet, who landed a Rolls-Royce, a Beverly Hills mansion, a fat contract, and stardom within twenty-four hours of climbing off the train. Honey says she has no use for the boys, and Mother Honeywell adds that her fifteen-year-old baby must somehow combine school-room and film work, or it's all off. Incidentally, Mrs. Honeywell has to sign Honey's checks, so perhaps Offenheim's latest discovery will have to mind Mother for awhile, anyway.

"I hate her!" Gail decided, scowling at the exquisite Honey. She flung the magazine away, but later she reluctantly reached for it again, jerking it out of the wire book basket, from under other magazines and books. She wondered if there were any mention of what they were paying Honey Honeywell. Yes, they were paying her twelve hundred and fifty dollars a week.

"I don't believe a word of it!" Gail thought. But it spoiled her twenty-third birthday, nevertheless.

CHAPTER III

SHE walked home in languid twilight; all Clippersville was relaxed and jaded after the fierce, unexpected heat of the spring day. Windows were opened everywhere, under the motionless new green of the tree branches; sprinklers whirled on the lawns. Her long shadow stretched before Gail as she walked along toward a painted gauze back-drop of mountains, mountains rising upon themselves to melt away into the soft afternoon sky.

A cloud of flies was buzzing in the level late rays of the sun, and Gail thought that summer would be upon the world in no time now, the hot, dry, inland summer of California. Edith would buy four yards of dark blue dotted swiss, as she always did, and make herself a dainty, cool summer dress to wear with her lace collar. And Ariel would get out her cheap little silk slips and striped frocks.

Gail looked at a dress in Müller's window, a blue organdy with thin orange ribbons hanging in a bunch from shoulder and waist. Near by it lay a broad-brimmed white hat, with an orange rose and a blue rose upon it.

Turning away from the window, she walked straight into the miracle.

"I beg your pardon!" she said, laughing. For she had really crashed into this man inexcusably.

"Gail Lawrence!" he said.

For a second she was bewildered, taken aback. Then with her own peculiar graciousness she extended both brown, square hands, and her round face lighted, and her blue eyes. The heavy Lawrence brows went up into two peaks, her square teeth flashed.

"Van Murchison!"

"Well, hel—*lo!*" he said delightedly.

"Van Murchison! Why, Van——" Gail said, stammering.

"How are you, Gail!" he kept saying, with incoherent laughter.

"But I didn't know you were in town!"

"But I wasn't!"

And they both laughed again, ecstatically.

"No, but seriously, Van," Gail presently began, in a delicious flutter but with a sensible and businesslike air, "seriously, when did you come and why, and how long are you going to be here, and what about Yale?"

"Seriously," he answered, dutifully, although still visibly abrim with laughter and excitement—"seriously—— But are you walking home?"

"I am. My honest working day is done."

Laughter. Van put his hand with delightful familiarity under her elbow. They turned toward the Lawrence house, some three or four blocks away.

"Isn't it amazing how the old place has grown?"

"Well, isn't it? But you've not seen it for five years, Van!"

"And are you still the Girl Kindergartner?"

"Oh, gracious no! That was Edith. No; I'm in the library. I'm head of the fiction department."

"And are you all still living in Racketty-packetty house?"

"Oh, that's what you used to call it!"

"That's what *you* called it."

"Yes, we're all there."

"Gee, Gail," Van said with simple fervor, "it makes a difference to me, having you here!"

"But tell me—you haven't told me——" She turned her face to him, the sunset behind her aureoling her tawny head with gold. "Tell me what you're doing here, Van!"

"Well, I went back to coll. after Christmas, see?"

"I see."

"Well, and I got a bug. Coughed, and pitted up, and was awful!"

Their joyous laughter, suddenly ringing out, was anything but suitable.

"I don't believe it!"

"Oh, I assure you!"

"You mean—lungs?"

"A pulmonary congestion."

"Help!" Gail said faintly, not knowing whether to believe him or not.

"So now I have to lie in bed, drink milk, and rest," the boy said.

"Dropped out of college?" She was horrified.

"My dear Gail," Van said reprovingly, "I darn near dropped out of life!"

"You *do* look thin," Gail mused, studying him.

"I'm fattening now."

"And where are you staying?"

"At my Aunt Martha's—Mrs. Arthur Chipp, you know. It's all been arranged. She's to watch me, and I'm to report to the doctor every week, and he's to keep in touch with the dear old guy at home, and Mother's to come out in June to inspect me."

"My *dear!*" murmured Gail, one pleased smile.

"You may well say! I'm going to have a keen time," Van Murchison said.

"Do you know——" They were walking along again. She fell silent.

"Do I know what?"

"Nothing. I was only—but it's nothing!"

"Come on now, say it!"

"Well, it's nothing," Gail protested with a happy little laugh. "I was only going to say that you seem—oh, tremendously grown up, somehow!"

"I'm twenty-four."

"I'm twenty-three—to-day."

"To-day!"

"Yes. We had the usual excitement at breakfast."

"You mean to-day's actually your birthday!"

"Actually."

"Well, what do you know about that?" Van murmured.

Gail, shabby, gay, and friendly, looking up from under the shadow of his high shoulder, gave him a smile of infinite friendliness.

"I'm terribly glad you're here!" she said simply.

"Listen, are you engaged?" the man demanded suddenly.

"Engaged?"

"Yep. To be married."

"Oh, heavens! As if I'd tell you if I were!"

Van's handsome face assumed a pleading expression, his voice was reproachful.

"Come on, now; give me the low-down!"

"There is no low-down!" Gail's face was aglow, her eyes dancing.

"Aunt Martha said she thought you liked Dick Stebbins."

"Dick Stebbins!" Gail was conscious of not wanting to forget a word of all this; she had a premonition that she would want to turn under her tongue the tidbit of his having already discussed her possible love affairs with his aunt.

"Don't like him?"

"Of course I like him. His mother rents our Stanislaus place." It was one of the Lawrences talking; her head was up. "His mother rents our Stanislaus place," said Gail, "and I see him on business now and then."

"Aunt Martha wasn't talking about business, you low prevaricator."

They both laughed again. They were at the gate now; the last beams of the sun were shining, level and merciless, upon the overgrown garden, piercing through the foliage of peppers and pampas grasses, rank wild roses, mammoth fuchsia and snowball bushes, to strike flame from the windows of the shabby old house hidden behind him.

Gail's heart did not falter. It was not the hour—it was indeed not the place into which to introduce a Yale college man, whose father owned a chain of flour mills. But hospitality, deep-rooted and instinctive, blotted out all lesser considerations.

"You're coming in, Van?"

"I can't to-night."

"Oh, listen——"

"No, honest, I can't! You know how things are at the Chipps'. People coming to dinner—a lot of fuss."

"Soon, then."

"Soon! But when can I see you?"

"At the library—any time."

"At the library. And say, listen, we'll go to dinner. We'll go off places, and eata da spaghett'—what?"

"Oh, grand!"

Then he was gone. And Gail turned in at the gate, her heart singing. Oh, what a spring night, and what a thing it was to be twenty-three and to live in adorable, romantic Clippersville!

Edith was in the kitchen, Sam at the table eating the large, filling sandwich which, at nineteen, seems a suitable preliminary to a hearty meal. Ariel, her thistledown golden mop in some disorder, was drifting listlessly to and fro between dining room and kitchen, setting the table for supper. Phil had not yet come home. They would all tell each other presently that he was delayed at the Iron Works; they would all know that he had stopped at the Cass cottage to see Lily.

"Gail, Vance Murchison's back! He's got consumption, and he's up at the Chipps'."

"Yes, I know. I met him!"

"Does he look awful?" Ariel asked, pausing, the round bread board, the big loaf, the long knife pressed against her budding breasts.

"No," Gail answered with a wholesome laugh, "he looks perfectly fine."

Edith had a small volume opened before her on the sink, and as she stripped the hot, silky skins from boiled sweet potatoes her eyes were following the printed lines. Sam returned to a book that was before him on the table.

"*Marius, the Epicurean*—I've seen it a million times," Gail said, inspecting Edith's book, her cheek close to her sister's ear. "Is it good?"

"It's—simply—marvelous," Edith murmured.

"Gail, they want me to be Lady Teazle."

"What! The lead?"

"That's what Miss Potter said. I'll be rotten," Ariel predicted gloomily.

"Oh, Ariel, I think that'll be simply grand!" Gail exclaimed enthusiastically. "Ede, did you hear that? Ariel's going to be Lady Teazle!"

"I thought Aileen Fernald would," Edith observed, interested.

"Aileen," Ariel explained, her red lips twisting to a sneer, "said that maybe her mother was going to take her East."

"Gosh, you ought to read this—gosh, it's good!" Sam muttered from the table.

"Sammy, you oughtn't spoil your dinner with all that bread and peanut butter!"

"And he had a chocolate milk-shake at Dobbins'," Ariel added accusingly.

"Oh, Sam, how can you!" But Gail leaned sympathetically over his shabby sweater shoulder none the less. "Is it entertaining?" she asked, enjoying his enthusiasm.

"Gosh, it's marvelous!"

There were a great many books in the kitchen, as there were in every other room in the house. They were piled up on window sills, and lay face down on the seats of chairs. Members of the Lawrence family were eternally hunting for them, searching and lamenting through the halls, and up and down the old-fashioned, twisting stairs. Brothers and sisters alike read at every possible moment; went off to sleep reading at night, wakened early to reach for a book.

There was a dim old library, darkened by shrubbery, in the house, and the classics on its shelves were kept free from damp and moths by incessant handling. About once a month the Lawrences tried to restore order there, sternly returning the odd volumes of Dickens, Scott, Thackeray, Trollope, the Kingsleys, Tennyson to their places. Shakespeare never rested anywhere long, and the classic poets fared badly as they fell into baths, were spattered with kitchen grease and gravy, or were exposed to the dews and winds of the garden.

These were all in formal, well-bound sets; their purchase had marked the height of the Lucky Lawrences' fortunes. Later favorites were in cheaper covers and in odd volumes: Stevenson, Sidney Porter, Mark Twain, Kipling. They coasted about on lower shelves, and were interspersed by heterogeneous leather volumes—old books abandoned even by a country library, and brought home gladly by Gail Lawrence.

Phil came in before dinner was quite ready, grinned at his sisters, and went upstairs. He came down in a few minutes, to sit in the kitchen and wearily, kindly join in the general conversation. Phil was not as tall as Sam, and was thinner than the others, but he had the Lawrence coloring, dark lashes and heavy brows framing blue eyes, clear brown skin, wide mouth, tawny hair. He was the quietest member of the family, as befitted its head, the man upon whose shoulders heavy responsibility had fallen in boyhood, and who saw life through sober, sensible eyes.

"Whatch' reading, Sam?"

"The Mysterious Stranger. Gosh, it's funny," Sam murmured, not looking up, not losing a word.

"Read this?" Philip took a slim, shabby leather book from his pocket, and extended it to Gail.

"No, I never did, Phil. Do you like it?"

"It's good." Phil restored *Sartor Resartus* to his pocket, and Gail had a moment of seeing all the Lawrences in a romantic light, and felt suddenly happy. It was poetic, to live in this tumbledown old mansion, and read books, and be young.

"Gail, you look awfully pretty to-night," Phil said, watching her.

"In this old rag?" She had assumed command of Edith's rather wavering dinner, seasoning and thickening with a masterful hand. Now she began to pour a dark meat mixture upon a platter already well filled with a rough rice ring and diamonds of toast.

"What is it?"

"Kidneys."

"Perhaps Van Murchison's return has something to do with Gail's appearance," Edith suggested archly.

"Oh, is he back?"

"I met him in the Calle," Gail said, rendered absolutely apathetic by Edith's merrily sympathetic manner.

"If there's a new beau in town——" Edith continued rallyingly.

"Oh, shut up!" Gail wanted to say rudely. But she controlled herself. Dinner was served.

Phil himself carried in the coffee pot; his sisters told him that he drank far too much coffee, but now when he was working hard all day and studying for an engineer's diploma he could not begin to stop. He sat, absent-minded and gentle, at the head of the board, sometimes coming out of a brown study to give Sam more gravy or decline carrots for himself.

"What's the matter with Ariel?" he presently asked.

"Why, a lot of them are going to the Standard, and I feel—" Gail began reluctantly, with a glance at her sister's mutinous face—"I feel that—on a school night——"

"What's showing, Ariel?"

"Oh, nothing special!" Ariel answered impatiently, savagely. She went on with her supper, angry tears in her eyes.

"It seems to me—on a school night—it isn't as if it was anything special!" Gail pleaded eagerly.

Phil regarded his youngest sister's drooping, buttercup-gold head sympathetically.

"Other girls' mothers let them go, Ariel?"

"They don't ask them!" Ariel answered briefly, bitterly.

"Well, then they're not your sort of girl," Philip decided, with a rather doubtful glance at Gail.

"They're hotsys," Sam contributed simply.

"They are not hotsys!" Ariel flamed.

"Well, whether they are or not, you don't want awfully to go, do you, darling?" the oldest sister pleaded.

Ariel made no answer, and the meal proceeded. Philip would go down to night school at eight o'clock, but it was barely seven now, and a general sense of pleasant relaxation and ease held the group. There was twilight in the world outside, and in the dining room heavy dusk. Presently one of the Lawrences would rise with a yawn that was a silent shriek and light the whistling gas in the tarnished old elaborate fixture overhead, and they would all blink and start up. But now they continued to eat the cooling rice and meat, the cold toast, the stewed apples, in a sort of comfortable laziness.

Sam was still chuckling over *The Mysterious Stranger,* Edith's thoughts were busy with a favorite subject—some sort of Utopia where women wore robes and sandals, and long tables under trees were set with buns and grapes and milk for all comers by laughing, vine-crowned girls and boys.

Ariel gulped and sniffed; she hated them all. Gail was thinking about friendly Van Murchison. And Phil was twenty-five, and deeply in love.

He had left Lily at a quarter to six, only an hour and a half ago; left her physically, that is; in spirit he was still with her, still feeling her thin, eager hands in his, her thin, eager lips on his.

Oh, she was everything they said she was—one of the shiftless Wibsers married to one of the disreputable Cass boys, common, uneducated, hopelessly not a lady, hopelessly not an intellectual. But she was—Lily, Phil's beloved.

She had drawn him into an unknown land, the land of desire. For weeks now it had mattered nothing to Phil what Lily was or was not. The days had smoldered with her; the nights flamed with her. He kissed her, and her slim figure in its dirty kitchen apron went limp and boneless in his arms. When she kissed him back he choked, and went on pressing savage kisses against her soft mouth until she struggled away hurt and gasping.

Lily was the gentlest little thing imaginable. Not like his creamy-skinned, tawny-headed, book-devouring sisters, who tore arguments alive from newspapers and magazines, and wrangled and disputed upon obscure questions, and were violent partisans of everything in general.

No, Lily was no controversialist. She was twenty-four now, and she had been demonstrating ever since her fifteenth birthday her entire ignorance of the world and her unfitness to cope with it. Clippersville thought it knew why Lily Wibser had gone up to San Francisco to take a position, when she was but fifteen. They might have known, they told one another, that she would turn up again, vague as to her business career, and more reckless than ever about her conduct, a year or two later. They might have known that she would pick one of the worthless Cass boys for her mate, and bear him three weak, wet, whining little babies in succession, before he and she parted forever.

They might have known that those Casses and Wibsers would have a shooting affray, and that Lily's particular Cass would disappear, giving Lily an opportunity instantly to claim state aid and sue for a divorce on the ground of desertion. Lily was strangely unafraid of courtrooms, officials, legal adjustments, officers of the law. She could always manage to scare up a simple white frock somewhere and a broad-brimmed white hat and appear innocently before the authorities to plead the cause of her three dear little baby boys.

Even then she never would say an unkind word of Joe Cass. Lily never said an unkind word of anyone; hers was the most loving heart alive. To Phil she was as pure as the Maid of Astolat for whom her mother had named her.

She lived in the squalid jumble of cabins that decorated Thomas Street Hill, where rusting machinery, old bed springs, and foul bedding aired all day among the improvised fences, the languishing gardens, and truck patches. Nibbling goats, mangy dogs, forlorn little babies with sore bare legs and caked faces, and shrill, vociferous women in dangling aprons peopled the district; the police department of Clippersville kept a stern eye upon it.

Philip Lawrence stopped at Lily's broken-hinged gate every night. The world knew now that she had got him, as women like Lily do get fine men, and felt sorry for those lovely sisters of his who were still so entirely in the dark.

Phil was thinking of her, in a dusky dining room, to the exclusion of all other thoughts. If his sisters or brother came into the picture at all, it was only as vague, clumsy obstructions between him and his happiness. Phil was young, like all the Lawrences, and arrogant, like all the Lawrences; he would not reason about Lily and their future.

Without money, without even sufficient clothing, with this dim old decaying mansion on his hands, with Gail, Edith, and Ariel to settle in life, Philip was nevertheless dreaming of Lily—Lily and himself established in one of the new Spanish tiled houses up near the Plazita. Lily's boys would be—oh, somewhere, and Phil and Lily would have nothing with which to occupy their minds but themselves and their love. Love, with Lily, in a little Spanish house with a breakfast patio—this was all Phil Lawrence wanted in life. She would cook his breakfast, and be waiting when he opened the grilled arched gate in the adobe wall at night.

The Spanish houses rented for sixty-five dollars, and Phil's salary was but fifteen dollars more, but that made no difference. He lived in the exquisite dream of it, paying only a gentle and abstracted attention to what was going on around him in the dreary old shabby dining room.

The group about the table had lapsed deeper and deeper into silence and somnolence. Edith had her elbows on the table, and was staring into the thick, hot, food-scented gloom like a cat. Sam had his tawny rumpled head frankly on the table. Ariel was hunched in her big chair, her chin cupped in her hand. Gail was smoothing the cold remainder of the rice into a compact lump, her heavy, overhanging brows knitted in thought, her full under lip slightly bitten. Rice cakes for lunch to-morrow. . . .

By the time they could barely see their own hands or one another's face there was a sudden interruption, and Dick Stebbins came unceremoniously through the kitchen and joined them.

Sam jumped up to light the gas, and their flushed sleepy faces laughed at one another in the sickly light.

"Eaten yourselves dizzy, eh?" said the newcomer, sitting down between Phil and Ariel, and drawing the depleted plate of ginger cookies toward him.

"We're all slowly dying," Gail said, with a nod of greeting. "I thought you might come to supper, Dick," she added.

"I got off early, and rushed out to see Mother."

He sat easily among them, a big, rough-looking young man with bushy dark hair and an Indian-brown skin. He was ranch-bred, and looked it, although the big hands were skillful and fine enough and his big mouth firm. He wore a heavy sweater in place of a coat; beads of perspiration stood out on his brow like a fine dew on this hot evening, and on his hirsute hands.

"How *is* your mother, Dick?" Edith asked politely.

"Not so good. Oh, well—she's pretty good." He lighted a cigarette; Phil lighted another. Sam, suddenly hoarse with eagerness, asked for a smoke, and the older brother tossed the little packet over to him with a steady look.

They all knew Dick Stebbins well. He was perhaps the only man, certainly the only unmarried one, who had the run of the house. The girls neither liked him nor disliked him consistently, or for any good reason. When they gave a picnic they were always glad to count Dick in as one more man. When he came in at inconvenient moments and criticized them tacitly for their unsystematic way of living, they cordially resented him. In either case he was not important; he was merely the son of those homely farmer folk who rented the Lawrence ranch. Dick had been raised on the Lawrence ranch out in Stanislaus; his mother was a plain, spare woman who knew how to "try out" lard and clean chickens, who "put up" three hundred jars of fruit every year, and who talked intelligently only on such subjects as the amount of "softening" the hard water needed, the correct handling of a rickety child, and the probable crop of pumpkins.

Dick had two sisters—tall, freckled, clever girls who had taught school and married young and scattered to neighboring towns. He was the baby, the only boy. They all worshiped him; very bad for him too, Gail used secretly to think.

But since he was a young male, she had considered him as a husband more than once. Not that he paid any attention to her or to anyone. He was a passionately ambitious man—"sort of sweatily ambitious," Ariel said with her favorite little sneer. He worked hard, he studied hard, he took nothing lightly. At twenty-six he had already graduated from a law college; he was going to make something of his life.

He regarded the frivolity and gaiety of the Lawrences with a sort of fearful fascination. For Phil he cherished that deep, wordless devotion that sometimes exists between a clumsy, inarticulate older man and a quick-spoken, autocratic younger one. There were only months between them, but Dick was far older than his years. The girls amazed and alarmed him. He often tried to cross-examine them, to find out what these beautiful wild young creatures, so different from his own sensible sisters, were really thinking about.

To-night he brought a large box with him: a florist's box.

"Dick, don't tell me you remembered my birthday?" Gail exclaimed as he gave it to her.

His unsmiling, suspicious glance flashed to her face.

"Whose birthday?"

"Mine."

Dick's dissatisfied look traversed the circle.

"I didn't know to-day was your birthday," he said resentfully. "No—I just met the boy bringing this in."

Gail was paying no attention to him. Her fingers had been experiencing the unfamiliar delight of tearing away green strings and cardboard and massed layers of silky green paper. Roses—wet, sweet roses, two dozen of them!

"A dozen and a half," Edith breathed, awed.

"Two dozen, Ede."

Gail had wrenched the card from its wire and torn open the wet envelope; the ink on the card was blurred, but the words unmistakable.

Twenty-three times twenty-three more. Love from VAN.

She seemed amused and pleased; they were all pleased. But Gail's moderately gratified manner gave no hint of the bubbling geyser of ecstasy that arose within her. This was almost unbelievable. Roses—and the intimate, offhand card from Van Murchison! Gail was only confusedly aware of what went on about her, of what the others were saying.

"School to-night, Phil?" Dick asked.

"Oh, sure!"

They went off together and, in a happy daze, Gail began automatically the business of clearing up. Her thoughts swam in a sea of golden light.

She took up her post at the dishpan. Ariel began to drift languidly to and fro with plates and glasses; Edith worked rapidly and conscientiously, doing a little of everything. She caught up salts and peppers, snapped napkins into the sideboard drawer, stepped out into the dark spring night to shake the tablecloth.

The kitchen grew hot; the gas soared and whistled. Gail worked on oblivious. Roses, roses, roses—the world was nothing but pink roses.

The two older girls made constant allusions to the flowers, Ariel listening from her regular place of study at the kitchen table.

"First Phil was going to throw Sam out if he smoked, and then he lets him smoke right at the table!" Ariel observed resentfully.

"You'd like him, Edith," Gail was saying, in what she hoped was a careless tone. "He's just a nice, simple kid."

"Not so simple!" Edith opined, in her airy affectation of sophistication. "For if you ask *me,* I'm not so sure that Somebody's lungs are affected at all! I'm not so sure that Somebody didn't come all the way west from Yale to see an old friend."

Gail's amused, tolerant look went to meet Ariel's conscious eyes. "Isn't Edith an idiot?" said Ariel's scornful glance. But Edith, wrapped in romantic surmises, saw nothing.

"When Ede talks love she makes my flesh creep!" Ariel said later. "She doesn't know anything about it, and she never will!"

"Oh, why do you say she never will?"

Gail had come into Ariel's room, as was her habit the last thing at night, to see that her little sister was comfortably in bed. She kissed Ariel now, and smoothed the discarded folds of blanket at the foot of the bed. The spring night was close, and there was warm starlight over the garden.

"I think Ede'll marry . . ." Gail mused hopefully.

When Gail left the room Ariel seemed to be almost asleep.

Edith, meanwhile, had come into Gail's room, not finished even now with the topic of Van Murchison. As an inevitable preliminary to coming upstairs every night, Edith and Gail always wandered along the bookshelves of the old library, selecting some three or four volumes that must be skimmed or read before they could go off to sleep. To-night Gail had laid the little heap close to her pillow, and Edith had her own books in her arm.

"When all's said and done——" Edith began, and paused.

"Which God forbid should ever be!" Gail interposed.

"Well, I know. But when all's said and done, Gail, who are the Murchisons? They've nothing but money," Edith said.

"Still . . . money . . ." Gail was laughing at her sister, but Edith did not resent it.

"Of course." She answered the uncompleted suggestion with a smile. "But I mean that money isn't—isn't like birth," she pursued.

Gail went about the room quickly, long adept in the business of making it ready for the night. She pinned back her window curtains, washed her face severely, thoroughly, ran a comb through her wet hair. She got into limp old pajamas, adjusted a singing Welsbach burner, said her prayers in a brisk, businesslike way, with her eyes on Edith's face, and got into bed. Her sister came to sit at her feet.

"It would be wonderful if one of us married well," Edith offered dreamily.

"On the strength of two dozen roses," Gail countered. "At a time of the year when roses are two dollars a dozen!"

"They have scads," Edith mused, undiverted.

"Murchison's Mills. I suppose they have millions," Gail agreed soberly.

"You see those big white trucks going up and down the highway all the time."

"But he's not really a Murchison, Ede."

"He was adopted. Nobody ever calls him Kinney."

"Was he legally adopted?"

"Oh, yes. He was only five when his mother got a divorce, and when Van's father died Mr. Murchison practically adopted him."

"How'd you happen to know that, Ede?"

"Reading a book about old Clippersville—you know that crazy book that hardly mentions Grandfather?

Well, it had all about some lawsuit, and the Chipps and the Kinneys were in it."

"He's awfully nice," Gail said impulsively, out of a silence.

"He must be. . . . Is he handsome, Gail?"

"Oh—collegiate-looking."

Edith was silent for a full minute. Then she said, with conviction, "You ought to come to Müller's and get one of those striped linens."

"I was thinking I'd get one of those dotted swiss dresses at the sale. They're three-fifty."

"You ought to get both," Edith said firmly.

"I wish I had a white hat!"

There was another silence in the big, dim, old-fashioned bedroom, whose heavy brocade wall papers had not been changed or cleaned for twenty years, and whose windows were still curtained in fringed rep. Dark mirrors on all sides gave back the shadowy reflection of the bed, in a pool of greenish light, with one square-fingered, square-jawed, tawny-headed girl against the pillows, and another perched at her feet.

"Isn't it fun, the way unexpected things happen!" Edith said.

"I was thinking we could ask him to Sunday supper."

"Eggs and cheese."

"And cornbread."

They were silent, staring into space.

"Do you know we're very romantic?" Edith demanded then.

"I suppose we are!"

"You know we are. I mean—Phil's so handsome and so smart, and everyone likes Sam, and everyone regards Ariel as a sort of genius, who's going to inherit Papa's gift, and you—you *certainly* can write."

"Oh, Ede! I had one article in the *Challenge,* and that was only because it was in favor of the Bay Bridge——"

"Abigail Lawrence! Your compositions *always* took prizes at school, and your Mothers' Day article was published on the front page of the San Francisco *Call.*"

"Well, I know." Gail pondered it a minute, and then said with a suddenly flushed face, "If I *should* marry anyone who had any money, Ede, and didn't have to work so hard and worry so much, I believe I could write stories!"

"You don't have to tell *me* that," said loyal Edith.

"Are two of your daughters going to be writers, Mr. Lucky Lawrence?" Gail whimsically asked the enormous, enlarged crayon portrait of her father hanging on the wall.

"All of us are going to get somewhere, and put the Lucky Lawrences back on the map!" Edith, gathering up her books for departure, prophesied staunchly.

CHAPTER IV

LEFT alone under her greenish light, Gail fell into a happy musing mood that made her supply of books entirely superfluous.

She had been getting tired and discouraged of late; for months life had seemed to drag with her, to lack its accustomed sweetness and interest. After all, Papa had been dead for almost seven years now, and they had been hard, puzzled years for the children he had left behind him, years barren of results. The old house had grown shabbier, the garden more of a jungle, the children themselves had grown only poorer and more bewildered. There appeared to be no escape; there had been no miracle.

Just at first there had been a decided social movement toward the orphaned Lawrences; immediately after Patterson Lawrence's heroic death in overcrowded Washington, all Clippersville had made a gesture of kindliness and concern toward his children. The best of the younger crowd had flocked to the Lawrence house on Sunday nights, and kindly mothers had sent in roasted chickens and layer cakes so that those poor brave youngsters should not be embarrassed in extending their gay hospitality.

During these days Gail and Phil had been the center of a happy, fun-loving group. These had been days of picnics, charades, amateur theatricals, sundaes at

Dobbins', movies, occasional hilarious gatherings at theaters or dances.

All that was over now. Gradually the smart crowd had drifted away, taking to motor cars, hotel tea rooms, roadhouses. The girls spent more on lip rouge and silk stockings now than the whole group had spent upon party suppers or ball-game tickets a few years ago.

Gail had neither the money nor the gowns to hold her own; Phil, always something of a Puritan, had frankly abandoned a company and a code with which he had no sympathy, and Edith had withdrawn first of all.

For actual years now—Gail always winced away in her secret thought from calculating them too exactly—there had been no attempt made on the part of Clippersville's golden youth to include the Lawrences in good times. Edith had become just a little bit twisted, in consequence, just a little too prone to explain merrily that the Lawrences did not want to have anything to do with modern ways, for they intended to marry men worthy of their name. Edith was just a little too ready with her explanations of why this man had drifted away from them, or that man had married some wretched little jazzing moron, instead of a woman of brains and sense. It used to set Gail's teeth on edge to hear Edith say gaily that her eldest three children were going to be named this and that and the other. Somehow it was Edith herself who was forever branding Edith Lawrence as hopelessly undesired, unmarried, as fundamentally and unconsciously insincere.

And Phil had given up society entirely, and admired —or *had* admired, for Gail never admitted it—that wretched little social outcast, Lily Cass.

As for Gail, for many months she had known herself to be sinking into utter commonplaceness. It could not be helped; she had seen it with the deadly clearness of vision that comes to ambitious, high-spirited girlhood. As time went on she was becoming more and more drab little Miss Lawrence of the library; Phil more and more the quiet, hard-working, underpaid iron worker; Edith more and more bookish, old-maidish.

The joyous promise of the romantic Lawrence youngsters had long been lost. Phil had told Gail, with a little patient bitterness, that it was to the Hunter and the Barchi boys that all advancement at the Iron Works had been given. Months had gone by without seeing one single eligible man coming to the Lawrence house.

Hardest of all for Gail to lose had been her faith in herself. She had been so sure, at sixteen, seven long years ago, that courage, self-confidence, high spirits, and honest service were the weapons with which to conquer the world. She had been so sure that she knew the secret!

She had seen opportunities, friends, successes coming to the Lawrences. Edith traveling, writing home letters about Lippo Lippi and London Bridge; Phil amazing the world with his engineering knowledge; she herself writing children's stories. Oh, nothing sensational, nothing classical—but simple, charming, boarding-school and ranch stories that all girls would love, and that would assure Gail pleasant fame among her townspeople, insure her an income that would mean pleasure and beauty for Ariel's girlhood, and an opportunity to develop the little sister's poetical genius.

Gail, at nineteen, had gone about composing, in her mind, the actual scenes and situations of these books; these popular school stories that should detail the adventures of one Margaret Muir. *Margaret Muir at Saint Helen's, Margaret Muir in Camp, Margaret Muir Takes Command.*

But Margaret Muir had faded into the world of shadows with all the other beautiful and satisfying things. Gail had gone on, through many a spring, fall, and cold dark winter, sweeping floors and washing dishes at home, and stamping books in the library, even while she whispered to Mrs. Booth that *Pollyanna* was out, but Mrs. Booth could put her name down for it if she liked.

And it seemed that forever—forever—forever the once lucky Lawrences would be poor, shabby, hard-working, and obscure, that Phil would help to build ships in which luckier men should cruise the waters of the world, that Edith would sell to more fortunate women the romances she would never realize in her own life, and Gail taste in her own mind only the rapture of typewritten pages, the ecstasy of holding her own book in her own hands, the shy delight of being introduced in distinguished gatherings as "the authoress."

Now, on her twenty-third birthday, unexpectedly, Van Murchison had given her back these dreams, and she lay wakeful in the dark, after Edith had left her, giving full rein to the joy of them, turning the key to a girl's heaven with four dollars' worth of pink roses.

Oh, how good she could be, how gracious and sweet and fine she could be if Van Murchison fell in love with her! That was all she needed, just a break—just an indication that wonderful things *could* happen, that poor girls *were* sometimes sought in marriage by rich young men.

Herself up at the big Chipp mansion . . . Van at her side . . . Arthur Chipp smiling at her . . . Mrs. Chipp asking her to call her "Aunt Martha."

"And what do you two young people plan?"

"Well, my sister Edith is to be my bridesmaid."

Young Mrs. Murchison. After all, if she was married at—say this time next year—nobody could say that she had been an old maid. Twenty-four—that was young to marry. And then Ede should marry—it would be easy enough to find beaux for the other girls, with the Murchison money and position behind her!

"What an adorable baby, Mrs. Murchison!"

"Yes, and have you heard, Mrs. Hunter, that my clever wife has a story coming out in the *Atlantic?* Written before this young man arrived. . . ."

The fun of it! The beauty of it! And why not? Other girls had had that much luck, and much, much more.

Drowsing off to sleep in the sweet summer darkness, Gail heard a door bang downstairs, just as the clock struck a drowsy eleven. The Lawrences, having little to protect, rarely locked doors; perhaps this was Sam coming in late, perhaps it was Phil. Anyway, unless it banged again she did not propose to get up to bother with it.

As it happened, it was neither, but Gail could not know that, and so she drifted happily off into the deep sleep of tired twenty-three, Van Murchison's laugh, his voice, still in her ears.

Sam had been in bed and asleep for an hour when the clock struck eleven. Phil had walked home from night school with Lily, who had recently developed an entirely ridiculous and adorable interest in her mind and had decided to study French on the very evenings Phil was at school. He was now sitting on the steps of the Cass shanty at the end of Thomas Street, looking down on the dooryard rubbish that was softened into something like beauty in the starlight, and murmuring incoherent and foolish absurdities to the little ear that smelled of heavy cheap powder and perfume.

No; the door had been slammed by Ariel—or rather it had been caught and slammed by an unexpected gust of wind when her small frail hand had opened it upon the summer dark. She had stood there, trembling, terrified, waiting to see if Sam or Gail or Edith had been roused, ready to fly to her room and scramble into bed at the first sound of an investigating footstep.

But there had been no disturbance upstairs, and after an interminable silence Ariel had opened the door again, noiselessly this time, and had slipped down through the overgrown garden, and into the deep green-black shadows at the gate. In a sky of clear dark blue millions of stars had been twinkling, and in the side lane, deeply rutted from winter rains, there had been two other stars, the watchful lamps of a shining low open car.

Ariel knew Buddy Raisch very slightly, but she knew, as all the town knew, that he was an overgrown big boy who had been in Stanford University for about three years and was still a sophomore. She knew what the scent of Buddy's breath signified, too.

Of the couple sunk in the rumble seat, an overcoated man with a collapsed little bobbed, slick head on his shoulder, she had known nothing. But she had settled in beside the driver with a little gasp of satisfaction and excitement.

"Hear me w'istle?" Buddy had whispered.

"Sure."

"Lissen, we're only going down the road a ways, and come back."

"That suits me," Ariel had said, unperturbed.

"You're a good little sport," Buddy had told her. They were out of hearing of the Lawrence house now, and he could move faster. He had stepped on the gas, and the car had shot like a projectile into the starry night.

CHAPTER V

THE next day, to all appearances, was like all the other Friday mornings of the year. Sam and Phil got away first of all, leaving a litter of coffee and cold toast on the kitchen table. Gail rushed down next, with her rich hair unwontedly flat and trim, and a kitchen apron replacing the office dress she too often wore into the kitchen. Gail had gone off to sleep on a wave of good resolutions, and this change in her appearance was evidence of the least of them.

Then Ariel, looking tired and seeming nervous, came down in a terrible hurry, as usual. As soon as she had departed for school Gail and Edith agreed that she had cried herself to sleep the night before.

"She's such a baby!" Edith said lovingly.

"It seems to me——" Gail brought herself back from her own personal dream with a little effort. "It seems to me she's not such a baby but that she knows that Phil is right about her running off every night to the movies. Ariel's quite old enough to see that that sort of thing only cheapens her, and doesn't pay!"

" 'The poet in a golden clime was born . . .' " Edith offered, buttering a roll. "I think the revelation of the ugliness and sordidness of life would absolutely kill her!" she added smoothly. Gail made no answer; her patient, level gaze went to far spaces.

Edith was feeling particularly pleased with herself this morning, because, upon the receipt of the roses for Gail on the evening before, a little difference of opinion had developed between herself and her two sisters, and in the end both Ariel and Gail had had to acknowledge that she had been right.

It had been Gail's first impulse of excited gratitude to telephone to the Chipp house, and ask for Van and thank him. Ariel had agreed to the extent of flying for the telephone book.

But Edith had demurred.

"I wouldn't, Gail. It'd look—it'd look—— Anyway, he might be upstairs, or somewhere, and be awfully embarrassed."

"Why shouldn't I telephone him, if he were?" Gail had demanded proudly, her cheeks the hotter because she had instantly realized that Edith was right.

"I think you're crazy, Edith!" Ariel had added.

"All I'm going to do is ask if Mr. Murchison——" But Gail had hesitated, with the receiver actually in her hand, and Ariel had said suddenly:

"Wait a minute, Sis. I kind of think Ede's right. Wait a minute!"

Furiously, sulkily, Gail had abandoned the telephone, muttering something to the effect that one would think that she was going to ask the man to elope with her! It had taken her several minutes to recover her equilibrium. After which she had become suddenly her usual sunny self, observing that Edith was quite right, that it would never do to let Van Murchison think that she did not get flowers every day.

Edith was remembering this little episode with some satisfaction this morning, while Gail mentally wrote and rewrote a suitably casual, yet cordial note of thanks to the sender of the roses.

She stopped at Müller's on her way downtown this morning and bought a box of fine notepaper. The note itself was written at the library a few minutes later, and Gail herself gave it to Eddie, the errand boy, directing him to mail it at the post office on his way downtown.

At the end of the note, in her beautiful, definitely dashing chirography that was itself squared in the Lawrence fashion, like her jaw and her shoulders and her hands, she added:

> If you can, come and have supper with us very informally —oh, so very informally!—on Sunday.

She thought of this, all day long. "Come and have supper with us informally—oh, so very informally!"

But at three o'clock she had something else of which to think, for the telephone in the library rang suddenly, and the voice on the other end demanded Miss Lawrence.

It was Van, cheerful and friendly. What time was he to come to supper, and why put it off until Sunday? This was Friday.

"What the heck are you doing to-morrow?"

"To-morrow's my Saturday at the library, until nine o'clock."

Gail could hardly bear the happy beating of her own heart as she hung up the receiver. She thought she would suffocate with sheer felicity.

The old library was suddenly irradiated; spring was outside its windows; the books were friendly, the murmuring patrons were friendly, the shadowy depths and angles of the book alcoves were friendly.

She went home on winged feet, stopping to pick up Edith, to buy the dotted swiss dress. Gail hesitated long over colors, finally deciding on a deep purple. It would be practical, and that shade was always lovely with the dull gold of the Lawrence hair.

"And a white hat," Edith decreed firmly.

"Oh, Ede, I oughtn't!"

"They're having a sale of them for two dollars."

Gail, thrilling to youth and springtime, followed her sister through the jaded, tumbled aisles of the store, and selected a delicious white hat, pulling it down over her heavy eyebrows, scowling reluctant admiration at the effect.

This was one of their happy evenings. They strolled home through the shabby streets, admiring gardens, stopping at shop windows. The sun set reluctantly; light lingered everywhere. A watering cart went by, spraying the warm, fragrant dust. Locust blossoms scented the air; cut grass wilted on the lawns. A block before they reached their own corner the Lawrence girls took the footpath through the Morrison place, their hands linked, their voices murmuring along together with the easiness of lifetime intimacy.

"Should you be glad if he was in love with you, Gail?"

"Oh, heavens, I've only seen him once in five years!"

"No, but I mean—should you?"

Gail considered. "Yes, I think I would."

"I don't know that I want you to marry and go away from Clippersville, Sis."

"It mightn't mean that." Gail paused, on the fresh grass that was thickly set with poppies and buttercups, under the Morrisons' oaks. She broke into laughter. "Aren't we idiots! To have it all settled but the wedding day!"

"Yes, but it sometimes comes as suddenly as that, Gail."

"I suppose it does," her sister agreed. "I was thinking," she said after a pause, "that we might have Dick on Sunday—that's one more man, if we dance to the phonograph or have games. That's four men to three girls."

"And Ariel really doesn't count as a girl yet, because she's just a kid," Edith reminded her, approving this plan.

They found the groceries tumbled in a pile on the tub boards on the porch, and began to carry them in: potatoes, apples, canned tomatoes, oatmeal. Gail went upstairs and unwrapped the purple swiss and looked at it critically; it was beautiful. She hung it and the white hat on one hanger, and thought that with its white dots and lace collar it went with the hat perfectly.

That night, while Edith sewed and Ariel played idly with pen and paper, Gail played solitaire. It had been her custom to do this ever since her father's death—perhaps even before that. Phil was lying on the sofa as he had lain, listening to her, for hundreds of evenings. Sam was busy with noisy apples. Now and then someone reached over and took a pared quarter of one of them and Sam began to peel a new one.

Gail as she played kept up a sort of monologue. Sometimes it was in the form of an argument, a dissertation. Often it was odd bits of poetry, or remembered scenes from Dickens or Poe or Stevenson, recalled word for word; most often of all it was improvised, in the form of a story or of biography.

Just how she had begun this she never could remember; it was a family institution now. Phil never went out when Gail started to play cards. Edith was her loyal prompter when Gail forgot a date in some dramatic tale of English history, or tried to remember the source from which some fantastic theory had sprung.

The Stuarts, the De' Medicis, the plots of Goethe, Dante, Wagner all passed smoothly in review when Gail was in good form. She could recite romantic ballads like "Barbara Frietchie" and "Eatin' on the Porch" in a fashion that made Edith weep silently and Phil laugh while he wiped his eyes. After one memorable evening, when Gail had reached the Black Hole of Calcutta, Ariel had had to move her mattress into Gail's room to get to sleep at all, and the whole family had talked Indian Mutiny for three days.

Best loved of all her performances were the chronicles of the Formaldehydes, an ambitious family of low origin whom she had invented, whose mother remained gauche, lovable, pitiable, and ridiculous, despite wealth and position. Gail could rarely be persuaded to pursue the histories of the Formaldehydes, protesting that they were too utterly silly. But her real reason for refusing was self-protection, the instinctive self-protection of the originator, who feels the strain of impromptu humor. To be romantic, poetic, argumentative, was one thing, but to keep up the pace of those idiotic Formaldehydes was quite another.

However, to-night the Formaldehydes returned in full force: the preposterous mother, the dumb, mousy, exasperating father, the pretentious daughter, the old grandfather who was eternally complicating their fashionable existence with references to the calving of cows and the diseases of chickens.

Phil, lying on the old couch with his eyes shut, his pipe in his mouth, laughed until the tears came. Sam laughed, his tousled head on the table. Edith laughed with the reluctance of the dignified, occasionally saying, "Oh, stop it, you idiot!" and Ariel laughed her wild, boyish laugh that was so sweet and rare a treat to those who loved her.

"On my honor, I think you could sell that stuff if you could write it, Gail!"

"Of course she could sell it, and make millions," said Edith.

Finally they were all talking eagerly, happily together, in their best mood. They talked of their father, of their poet mother, of the old days when the Calle was simply the old road that ran to the Lucky Lawrences' rancho, and the Stanislaus property was part of the estate.

"They used to roast a whole steer in the old fireplace every Saturday."

"They used to shear the sheep down at the pens. D'you know, Phil, part of the old 'dode wall is left, at the end of the meadow, below Thomas Street Hill, and there's dirty black fleece there now, tangled into the mallow bushes!"

" 'Member when we used to picnic down there before the highway was changed?"

"Say, isn't it time for us to have another picnic?"

And they all thought, and Gail thought first, "We'll ask Van Murchison!"

It was all heartening and happy, and especially wonderful to have the evening end with them all wandering upstairs at once, lights out below, everyone at home, safe and united. Gail saw the roses, still bright and fresh, in her room, and sat on the edge of her bed with one shoe on and the other in her hand, for a long, long time, dreaming. It was not imagination then? Van Murchison had sent her those roses. He was coming to supper night after next.

CHAPTER VI

SATURDAYS and Wednesdays, every other month, Gail stayed at the library until it closed at nine o'clock. On these days Edith always came down at about six with a big sandwich and an apple, and Gail and she repaired to the dressing room where Gail devoured the collation, powdered her nose, exchanged the news of the day with her sister, all in ten minutes' time, and returned to the desk refreshed.

Alternate months she went home at noon on Saturdays and Wednesdays, but was on duty all day Sunday, opening the library at ten o'clock and remaining at the desk until five. Gail hated the Sunday duty, but the Saturday nights were for some mysterious reason eternally exciting. There was always a good deal of noise and traffic downtown, the theaters were packed, the streets gaily lighted, and the quiet, shadowy library seemed like a coign of vantage from which she watched the world.

The old chess enthusiasts would be studying, puzzling, over their boards in a corner. The usual doctor would come in to ask to see the usual reference book; the usual girl and boy giggle in one of the alcoves; the usual plaintive resourceless novel readers come up to the desk to beg in their usual aimless way for "something real good."

On the particular Saturday evening that followed his arrival in Clippersville Van Murchison came in. Gail was busily stamping and dating, opening and shutting the covers of books, when a voice in the line asked anxiously,

"Have you a good book about cockroaches?"

She looked up on a wild rush of delight, and there he was in dinner clothes, with a light overcoat on, but bareheaded. They laughed soundlessly together, and Gail sedately disposed of a dozen claimants before she was free to murmur with him for a minute, Van standing at the high counter, Gail seated and leaning on it from inside the oak inclosure.

"So this is where you are?"

"Oh, hello," smiled Gail.

"Hello!"

"D'you want a book?"

"Yes, I seem to need one. How about this one?"

She grinned at *Little Susy's Cousin Prudy*.

"I think that would be about your number."

"I'll bet it's racy! I'll bet there's considerable matter that couldn't go through the mails, in this book!"

"Oh, sh-sh-sh-sh!" For they were both bubbling audibly with suppressed laughter.

"Well," said Van, "I'm going up to the Speedwells' for dinner."

"Who are they?"

"Well—Corona Barchi married a Spence, see? And one of the Spence girls married a Speedwell, see?"

"Oh—Burlingame?"

"Burlingame. And gosh, how I hate it!"

"You do?"

"Oh, Lord, yes!"

He regarded her curiously.

"D'you mean to say you'd like it?"

Gail composedly stamped a returned book, smiled at a faded woman with bare gray hair and a wilted voile dress, and returned to the conversation.

"I *imagine* I would," she said.

"You don't go to dinners?"

"I haven't much chance."

"What'll you take to go to this one? I could do that—I could do what you're doing. Go in my place."

"Nonsense!" She laughed and shook her head. Van went away, leaving her with a feeling of contentment and completeness, a certain thrilled sense of being alive, of being pleased with everything.

Later, reading in bed, she told Edith Van had come in to see her.

"Gail, he *didn't!*"

"Oh, yes, he did."

"Oh, Gail," exclaimed Edith, "that's *significant!*"

"Well . . ." She wouldn't quite admit it. But she drifted off to sleep on the rosiest sea of hope and joy that ever a woman knows.

Van came to supper the next night, and everything was happy, unpretentious, and natural. Dick was there, not too argumentative or dogmatic; Phil stayed until about half-past eight, when he said that there was something he had to see a man about, and carried Dick off. Ariel had to write a composition about what the probable outcome of another great war would be, and they all became hysterical with laughter as they outlined the general possibilities.

The kitchen was just what a kitchen should be, when Van arrived, a social place in which three pretty girls were busy and three rather clumsy men were trying to make themselves useful. Gail's biscuits were browned to a turn, and the famous Lawrence cheese-and-egg dish turned out perfectly.

She thought the dining room charming, for the late twilight of a spring Sunday made it possible to dispose of gas light, and the garden outside the windows was a breathing paradise of crowded scented bloom. Rank lilacs crushed against bridal wreath, and bridal wreath against syringa and snowballs and massed golden banksia roses. The crimson rambler had hung itself in the spread lower branches of the great oak tree, and through the fuzzy new foliage of the tree and the transparent red petals of the blossom the sunset sent arrows of light. Quail called plaintively; Edith's doves kept up a constant soft mourning cry.

They sat about the table until eight o'clock, and then Phil and Dick, after duly carrying handfuls of dishes into the kitchen, departed. Ariel began at the kitchen table her mutilated composition, and Edith generously forced Gail and Van away.

"No, please—it's nothing. I'll leave them all until morning anyway!" protested Edith. "You were going somewhere—go on!"

"We were just going for a run. We can perfectly well get these out of the way," Gail argued. But she did not insist. Somehow the dishes and the kitchen did look greasy and dull to-night; a little domestic drudgery was all right, but it would not do to disgust Van with too much of it.

She had combed her bushy, unruly hair with a wet comb and fitted it into a bright cap of tawny waves, her eyes were glowing, the purple frock and white collar infinitely becoming.

She caught up a coat, and she and Van went out in the dusk to his roadster and rolled smoothly away from dingy Clippersville up into the fragrant hills where twilight still lingered, with the sweet smell of dew on dust and of meadows wilted under the long day's sun.

"How about Old Aunt Mary's?"

"What sort of a place is it? I've never been there."

"Oh, highly respectable! Two cops always on guard. They all but smell your breath when you come in!"

They went, accordingly, to Old Aunt Mary's, a low wooden shack on the Peninsula Highway, with a greasy dance floor in the center, and greasy bare tables all about it. The air was thick with grease, for Aunt Mary's big frying kettles were right in full view; Aunt Mary and her colored assistants were also greasy.

But the music was good, and the floor good, and the whole scene so novel to Gail that she found it delightful. She and Van drank ginger ale and danced and sat talking between the dances, as did all the other maids and men.

They talked flippantly and with much laughter, as young persons who are just making each other's acquaintance usually do. Van even laughed when a chance question from Gail brought the conversation about to his own condition.

"But ought you be up so late? Oughtn't you be in bed, drinking acidophilus milk or something?" Gail demanded as the clock's hands moved to half-past nine.

"Listen—listen. Be careful of the words you use!"

"Acidophilus milk—that's just buttermilk!" Gail had repeated, undaunted.

Van crushed out his cigarette, smiled down at his own fingers, smiled up, with a glance into her face.

"My dear child, there's no more the matter with my lungs than with yours!"

"There's—*what?*" Gail demanded blankly.

"I haven't got con," Van reiterated. "I flunked out of college at Easter, that was all! Or no," he remembered, conscientiously, "I did have a heavy chest cold, coughing, all that. That was part of it, you see? I had to stay home a week at Christmas, and what not——"

In his incorrigibly gay manner he finished the sentence with a shrug.

"You're not sick at all!" Gail said, in so disappointed a tone that they both laughed outright.

"Well, if you feel that way about it I'll see what I can do. I can lie out in the wet grass a few nights——"

"No, but seriously, haven't you an infection?"

"Not at the moment, no. But given time——"

"Oh, honestly, I think you are the biggest liar I ever heard of!"

"No, I'm not. I'll not deceive you, dear. These are the days of heavy competition, and there are better liars—there really are. But I'm young, and I'm willing. In another three years some of the fellers who——"

"For heaven's sake, shut up! You make my head go round!"

"Your head is already round!"

"What did you flunk in?" the girl asked, after a space filled in with laughter.

"Physics."

"Ha!" she said.

They sat on, watching the dancers. Against the low open pine crossbeams of the roof cigarette smoke was rising blue and opaque. The music droned on, the saxophone whining above the other instruments;

the crowd was thinning now, some of the tables were empty.

When the clock struck ten Gail said she must go home. Van made no protest; he seemed tired, too, willing to say good-night.

They were laughing again, driving home in the starlight. But at the Lawrence gate Gail was conscious that somehow their parting was going to be a little stiff and flat. Some minutes before they arrived she began to dread it. It would be stiff. It would lay a heavy bar upon the frothy gaiety of the evening.

But she could not save herself. She could not be suddenly flirtatious—amorous. She did not know how. Did he expect her to let him kiss her good-night? Did he even want to kiss her? She did not know.

Suddenly she felt like an innocent, awkward little girl. A sense of helplessness smote her. This happy evening must end on a high note, she must be equal to it. She must not say good-night like Edith saying good-night to one of the girls from the store—like a nice old lady saying good-night to a dear old friend.

But somehow she could not carry it. The wild thought of leaning above him for a second, when she moved to leave the car, and of putting a butterfly kiss on his bared head, crossed her flurried mind. But that would be idiotic—that was not the way girls kissed boys nowadays. They sank against the boys, their bodies limp, their painted mouths plastered against the boys' mouths. Such a girl at this moment would have her head on Van's shoulder.

While she confusedly considered it, they had reached the gate and she was out of the car, Van making no movement to get down. Gail went about to his side of the automobile, and stood looking up at him for a moment, with the white rush of the headlights throwing all the world into a glamour of smoky black, and the dull red glow of the plate-light illuming her tired, eager face and tumbled tawny hair.

"Van, I've had a perfectly delicious time."

He moved the gas control idly to and fro on the wheel.

"Sure, it was fun."

His own voice seemed flat. Gail tried desperately for the hilarity of the earlier evening.

"As for your consumption, I shan't get over that for a long time!"

"My what?" he asked dully.

"Your fake consumption."

It was no use. Perhaps they were both too tired for talk, Gail thought. She tried again.

"I hope my unfortunate little sister didn't seriously write all that nonsense into her composition!"

"Hasn't she—but she's got sense enough not to do that?" Van said heavily.

"Oh, of course she has; I was only fooling!"

A pause, brief, but much too long. Then Gail said, "Well, good-night! See you soon?"

"Oh, sure!" he said, and "Good-night!" and he was gone into the dark.

The girl made faces at herself as she went up the steps; she was conscious of a shamed sort of feeling of anti-climax. It was as if she had sold her birthright, somehow.

Actually, she had not compromised; there had not been a word or a glance all evening that might not have been exchanged by the most decorous of friends. But that was part of the trouble!

Or else she was tired; maybe that was it. Fixing up the house and setting the table and filling salt cellars and matching napkins was real work. Biscuits—they had turned out perfectly.

The front door was open, a bead of gas wavering in the hot, odorous hallway. Above, at the top of the great stairway vault, there was a dull blur of yellowish-red light.

Edith came out from her doorway like an angel, cool and fragrant from a bath. She welcomed Gail as if from the wars.

"Darling, did you have a good time?"

"Oh, marvelous. Ede, it's simply stifling in here."

"I know it is. Phil and Sam and Ariel and I sat on the back steps for ages, and we nearly smothered when we came in. But I opened your windows——"

"And turned down my bed, you angel!" Gail said, in her bedroom now, and finding it orderly and airy, with the great pear branches stirring in the black darkness outside the window, and the flat wide bed smoothly opened.

"No, but tell me, did you have fun, Gail?"

"It was heavenly. We drove around for awhile, and then we went down to Old Aunt Mary's."

"Gail Lawrence! Was it wild? On Sunday night!"

"No, it was as calm as a mill pond. There were two policemen there, and a lot of nice college boys. Some of the girls looked rather—well, ordinary; but it was very quiet. Nothing rough."

"I thought it was the limit!" said the usually elegant Edith.

"It didn't seem to be."

"I wonder if you'd know the limit if you saw it, Gail," the younger sister said, with a sophisticated, fond smile.

"Oh, Edith, get off your foot!" Gail wanted to say. But she could not be mean to Edith to-night, when Edith had finished up the dishes, and stayed at home to amuse the boys, and put Gail's room in such perfect order. So she smiled too, and went on with her undressing. Her mood began to change: everything was all right.

"How long was Phil gone?"

"Oh, not long. 'Bout an hour."

"He didn't——" Gail paused.

"No, he didn't have time to see anybody. I don't believe he's so crazy about Lily Cass," Edith opined.

"He and Dick had to go over to the Iron Works, didn't they?"

"Yes. And, by the way, Dick's sleeping here, because he and Phil want to get up at five and go over and see an installation—or something—at Milpitas."

"An oil circuit breaker."

"Was that it?"

"Phil was telling me about it before dinner. They won't be here for breakfast?"

"No; they said five o'clock."

"They'll take the five-thirty trolley."

"They're going in Dick's car."

"Dick's car! Since when has he——"

"Isn't it killing! It's quite decent-looking, too."

"But how on earth? I thought he was saving every cent." Gail, washing her face, turned about in surprise.

"Well, he is. But you know old Benstein, of the second-hand place down near the hill?"

"I know the place. Yes, and I kind of know the old man too."

"Well, two cars collided out on the highway near there about three months ago, it seems, and old Benstein bought them—they were wrecks—for about fifteen dollars apiece. So he sent for Dick, it seems, and told him if he'd put the touring car in order he could have the roadster. Of course, being Dick," Edith interpolated, with a little scornful smile and shrug, "he had to tell Benstein that the roadster was much the better car, but it seems the old man said, 'You should tell me that before I am married and have four girls!' "

"Did Dick tell you that?"

"Yes, he was awfully funny. He is sometimes, you know. Well, anyway, Dick did Benstein's first, and he's been puttering over his own for about six weeks. So last night he drove it in from Stanislaus, and put it in Joe Foster's garage, and Joe looked it over, and he says it's perfect, and he offered Dick two hundred dollars for it."

"He didn't!"

"He did."

"Dick's so darn admirable," Gail said indifferently, opening her book, "that you expect him to break out rail splitting 'most any minute! I can just see him sweating over politics some day, and being on the losing side every time! 'Honest Dick Stebbins for Governor!' "

"Isn't that exactly what he'll do!" Edith said, in deep relish.

"But I like old Dick!"

"Oh, so do I," the younger sister agreed eagerly.

She went away, and Gail lay musing, her open book in her hands. The memory of her parting with Van, in the deep black night gloom at the gate, kept returning to buzz about her like a midge, and spoil all the other recollections.

"Why, you poor idiot!" Gail said to herself, almost audibly. "You got what you wanted, and ten times more than you wanted, and you're no more satisfied than a rabbit! He came to supper, didn't he? And everything went well, didn't it? And you went out in his roadster, up into the hills, and then had sandwiches and ginger ale at Old Aunt Mary's, didn't you? What do you expect—an offer of marriage and a diamond ring?"

But still the sense of inadequacy, of her own failure to rise to the situation, fretted her.

"Listen," she said sternly to herself, "he certainly didn't expect you to hurl yourself into his arms. You met him last Thursday."

She put out her light, but her thoughts milled and milled unceasingly. What had happened to the gay, companionable mood of the earlier evening? What had made the parting so labored, so artificial?

"Why is it," Gail asked herself savagely, "that I can get along so beautifully with girls, and act like such a fool with boys? I'll probably never hear from him again. The Ponds and the Spences will get hold of him. . . . I don't care!

"If he'd been a girl, to-night, I would have gone on talking, laughing, putting off coming into the house. I would have kept saying, 'Listen, I *have* to go in.'

"Oh, well, what difference does it make! We'll all be dead in a hundred years!"

And so restlessly off to sleep, oddly baffled and dissatisfied after this marvelous day on which the dream had come true.

The next day she and Edith had real trouble to think about and to discuss as they walked to work.

In the first place, Sam had told them at breakfast that he, Sam, had been driving some boy's car without a license and had been fined fifteen dollars by Judge Gates.

"Billy Gates has a nerve!" had been Gail's indignant comment.

"Oh, that was all right. Phil paid it," Sam had said in his confident, little-brotherly manner. Phil always took a certain amount of trouble from the younger members of the family as a matter of course. He never nagged or criticized.

"How could Phil pay it?"

"Oh, he worked overtime all last month, you know. He had something coming to him."

"You oughtn't to have done it, Sam. You're such a *fool!*" the older sister had said reproachfully, affectionately. She repeated the phrase to Phil, when he came in late to report his expedition with Dick.

"You can't say that, Gail. It's natural for a kid to want to drive a car. Most kids Sam's age," Phil had reminded her temperately, "have their own cars."

So reasonable, so generous, such a rock of strength about a thing like this, it had been staggering to his sisters to have him add, with a little self-consciousness:

"I was thinking, when we were having Dick and Van Murchison to supper last night, why not ask Lily Wibser some time? She's an awfully sweet little thing—she's had an awfully rough deal."

Edith had felt every fiber of her being stiffen; Gail's hands had begun to tremble as she had said pleasantly, confusedly,

"Well, of course—if she'd like it, Phil."

"Why shouldn't she like it?" Phil had asked in a level, challenging voice.

"No reason why! Except—hasn't she rather young children?"

"Yep. She has three kids." Phil had been refilling his coffee cup.

"The father was that skunk, Joe Cass, wasn't he?"

"The father was Joe Cass. But he wasn't such a skunk. He was unfortunate—he was weak, I guess."

"I don't think she'd come!" Gail had said, uncomfortable but determined.

"You might try!" Phil's voice had been level, composed. He had returned to his newspaper with no further reference to the subject.

His sisters, in utter consternation, had spoken since of little else. Drying dishes, making beds, they had discussed the sickening possibilities of Phil's relationship with the odious Lily, until they both were flushed and nervous, worn out before the business day had even commenced.

"She's simply mesmerized him, that's all!"

"She must have. Why, she doesn't even speak good English! And Phil, who always criticizes people so if they talk badly and use wrong words——"

"It's just too horrible!"

"Gail, we *couldn't* ask her to the house!"

"*I* don't think we could."

They parted on the dubious note, deeply worried as they had been worried so many, many times before about Sam, Ariel, Phil in turn, about family finances social complications.

"Just when I was—sort of—looking forward to Sunday-night suppers," Gail offered in parting, when they came to the Calle.

"Yes, I know!" Edith answered quickly.

"What on earth can we *do,* Edith, if Phil says anything more?"

"Well, have her, I suppose!"

"But she's simply—she's simply not respectable!'

"I know."

"I mean, everyone knows what those Wibsers are, and the Cass boys are just gangsters!"

"I know," Edith conceded again anxiously.

They went their ways, Edith immediately to forget all home problems in the nice question as to where on earth the new stock was to go, Gail to plunge into arrangements with the visiting cataloguers, who considered themselves above the law and seized such books as they needed from the very fingers of the readers.

Her thoughts had time to go to Van, however, at intervals during that day and the next day. She began the girl's calendar: "It's only one full day since I saw him—it's only two full days—it's only the morning of the third day."

CHAPTER VII

IT BEGAN to seem like a dream to her that he and she had been laughing over the library counter last Saturday night, and that he had come to supper with the Lawrences, and that she had gone down the highway, beyond Dumbarton Bridge, to Old Aunt Mary's for a late supper and dancing.

Edith asked, delicately, lightly, if there had been any friendly visiting, telephoning, during the day, and Gail became expert in careless replies.

"I'm not sure, Ede. Somebody called me while I was home for lunch, Miss Foster said—she said it was a man's voice."

Or, "I think he's away in Stanford, Ede. He goes over there a lot."

And then, still quietly, indifferently, on Thursday night, "Oh, yes! Van Murchison was in. It seems Mrs. Chipp is having a house party down at their place in the Santa Cruz mountains a week from this weekend, and she wants me to go!"

"What!" Edith ejaculated, incredulous.

"Oh, yes." Gail was trimming asparagus, tying it in little faggots. "They have a big place down there—cabins, he said, and a swimming pool."

"You have a bathing suit!"

"Yes. We go down Friday and get back Sunday afternoon."

"Oh, Gail, aren't you excited?"

Gail laughed a little protestingly.

"But yes I am," she admitted honestly, "terribly excited!"

"I'd be doing handsprings. Imagine the fun! I'd be simply sick at my stomach with thrill!" Edith said.

"You'd be the ideal guest, I must say!"

And they both laughed.

"But of course they only want me because Van does," Gail suggested, suddenly sober. "He probably asked his aunt to ask me!"

"Oh, for heaven's sake!" Ariel said impatiently and unexpectedly, in her husky tones, from her place in the kitchen rocker, where she was supposedly studying *Our Neighbors, the Americas.* 'For heaven's sake, what would you *want* her to ask you for—because Mama was a church member? You know very well you're not an intimate friend of hers. Why *should* she ask you!"

"Really, Ariel, you're terrible!" Gail said. But she and Edith laughed just the same.

"I'd much rather," Ariel muttered, returning to her book, "I'd much rather go a place because a boy wanted me than because his mother did!"

And laughing helplessly and a little shocked, Edith and Gail admitted that there was something in this view.

"I have everything," Gail said. "I have my blue velvet; I have my Christmas slippers; I have my white hat. I'll do my old linen up myself; it'll be fine for roughing—walking or anything. And I'll wash my sweater!"

"There'll prob'ly be tennis!" Ariel suggested.

"Oh, probably!" Gail was deep in dinner preparations; her tone sang.

"Did she come in, Gail, or did she write a note?"

An instant's chill. Then Gail said casually, "Neither, my dear. She sent a message by Van."

There was a silence. Edith stood distressed and disappointed in the center of the kitchen; Ariel looked up alertly from her book. Gail went on busily with her cooking.

"Well, she *will* write?" began Edith, on an upward inflection.

"She may!" Gail agreed indifferently. "Give me that towel, Ede!"

"Well, you won't think of accepting unless she *does* write, Gail?" Edith persisted unhappily.

"I can't say that," Gail answered airily, "as I have accepted already!"

"You haven't," Edith stated flatly.

"I say I have."

"But, Gail——"

"My dear Edith," Gail interrupted, in a final, big-sisterly tone, "we are living in the Twentieth Century, not in the good old days of Pamela and Evelina."

"Well, I'm very much surprised at you!" Edith said, trembling. Dinner was served in a sulphurous silence.

Phil, hungry, grimy, and tired, noted at once that something was wrong, and his first question brought the whole thing down upon him in an avalanche.

Gail was flushed and angry, Edith reasonable and cool. They talked at once, and Phil frowned faintly, smiled faintly, as he looked from one face to another.

"Phil, isn't it ridiculous in this day and generation to expect a person to send you an engraved invitation——"

"I didn't say an engraved invitation!"

"Because, I mean, everything's done so informally now, and people telephone invitations to weddings!"

"Here's what I feel, Phil: ever since Papa died we've stood for something, haven't we? I mean we've been decent, we've lived like gentlefolk, we've always talked as nicely as we could, and not used slang, and gone with nice people, and rolled the butter balls——"

"If you'll kindly tell me what butter balls have to do with my wanting to go——"

"No, but listen, Phil! We've always held up our heads, and been known as girls who *weren't* cheap, who *wouldn't* jazz—haven't we, Phil? It's all we have—it's us," Edith, her eyes suddenly wet with tears, went on shakily.

"Perhaps if it was you that had the invitation you wouldn't be so sure of it!" Gail muttered. But this was unfair, and she felt a twinge of real shame as Edith winced and meekly fell silent, wiping her brimming eyes.

Philip had championed Gail all her life, and she adored him as her unfailing authority. It was therefore like a blow in her face to have him say, judicially, over his pipe:

"I'm not so sure but what Ede's right, Gail. You aren't sure that Van Murchison—he's an awfully nice kid, and he's most amusing and all that, and he means well enough—but you aren't sure that this kid ever spoke to his aunt at all. How do you know——"

"Oh, listen, listen!" Gail said, managing a laugh, but inwardly seething with fury. "He didn't ask me to go to China! He asked me to go for two nights to Los

Gatos—and I'm going! He came into the library and said that his aunt was giving this house party, and would like to have me come, and I said I'd be delighted, and that's all there is to it!"

There was a full minute of dead silence, during which her angry voice hung in the air. Then Ariel expelled a long, sighing breath, and Phil shrugged philosophically.

"You're of age," he said briefly.

Nothing more. The girls, as they cleared the table, avoided each other's eyes and presently began to talk lifelessly of other things.

"Do you want this gravy saved, Gail?"

"Put it into the soup."

"Did you get onions to-day?"

"No, I meant to, too. I'll positively get them tomorrow."

Phil went out without another glance or words for his favorite sister. When Gail and Ariel chanced to be for a minute alone in the kitchen, Ariel seized the opportunity to say eagerly:

"Stick it out, Gail! If everyone felt the way Edith does, no one would have any fun at all! We'd all be old maids!"

Ariel's sympathy was very sweet. But it did not have the value of Edith's approval. On the contrary, there was something disturbing in this suggestion of a general mutiny against the Lawrence way of doing things.

"I wouldn't do anything that was wrong, baby."

"As if I didn't know that, Gail!" Ariel hesitated. "It's just that they don't understand," she said.

"The truth is—Van is fine and all that, but I doubt very much if his aunt is lady enough to know *what* she ought to do!" Gail argued.

"You'd be a long time waiting for a gentlewoman's letter from *her,* because she'd have to learn to write it!" Ariel observed, with her infantile air of shrewdness. Gail kissed her on a troubled laugh as Edith came again within hearing distance.

It was always a wretched state for her, to be out of sympathy with Edith; to Edith it was absolutely insufferable. Before they had finished the dishes the younger sister said suddenly and painfully:

"Gail, I don't know why we got all wrought up over this thing! I know—of course I know that you'll do what's right. And whatever seems right to you will seem right to me, because I think you're the most wonderful person I know and much the smartest in the family."

Long before this finale was reached they were in each other's arms, crying away all the soreness and ugliness of the last hour.

"Of course it's only because I so want to go—and I don't have so many chances at this sort of thing," Gail said, a little thickly, when they were quieter and she could sit at the table cutting the pot roast trimly into stewing form.

"I know!" Edith was still anxious.

"All I can say is," Ariel said hoarsely, gently, "that if you're going to wait for regular invitations you simply will stay at home!"

"No, you're not right; you're wrong there!" Edith said quickly, distressed.

"I *am* right," Ariel persisted. "Because you *do,*" she ended, eloquently.

"I think money has more to do with it than our being . . . decent," Gail argued, uncertainly.

Ariel returned to the exports of Chile. She had arranged with a boy friend that he should call her on the telephone at eight o'clock, and she should answer his call with a pleasant, dutiful "Oh, yes, Miss Hemmet?" Miss Hemmet was her mathematics teacher. She would then say to Gail, "Gail, I'm going over to Miss Hemmet's, and then I'm going to meet the crowd at the corner and go down to Sticky Dobbins' for some ice cream. I asked Phil, and he said, 'All right.' "

It was a risky game she was playing, but after all it was a game. Edith was playing no game at all, and Gail was demonstrating more forcefully every instant how little she knew of the rules. Better anything than to spend one's evening darning the fraternal socks, as Edith was placidly preparing to do, or patiently to settle down to helping Sam with his correspondence-school aviation work, like Gail.

The telephone rang.

"Take it, freshman!" Gail said to her younger sister. But Ariel needed no prompting; she was already halfway to the hall.

"Oh, thank you, Miss Hemmet, I will!" her sisters heard her say. She came back to her work with her transparent skin exquisitely flushed, and her strange eyes alight. "Gail, Miss Hemmet wants me to come over. And Phil said we could go to Dobbins' afterward."

"Oh, that's all right. Go ahead!" Gail said absently, Ariel faded from sight silently, was gone.

"Gosh, it's crazy! They've got the question all wrong!" Sam shouted frantically, anything like scholastic concentration driving him almost mad. Tousled, hot, impatient, he reared over the clean blue test books restively, like a horse.

"Could we find it in the encyclopædia, Sam?"

"Oh, Gail, be your age! They were printed about 1860!"

Gail laughed helplessly.

"But it must be in your books, Sam."

"Well, it's not, I tell you!"

"I'm going to look for it." She seized a book.

"You'll not find it."

"Well, I like to look for it anyway. It's fun. It's kind of like a puzzle."

"I hope you enjoy it!" Sam growled. But a few minutes later he seemed to feel a sudden prick of compunction and came about to her side of the table to drape his ungainly length in her lap and rumple her hair with his big paws. "You're cute," he said drowsily.

"Sam, think of the fun of being an aviator! Think of being first in the field! Come on now, be a darling!"

"I'll get killed, Sis. I'll be all a bloody mess, down in a cornfield."

"Well, I'd rather you'd be a doctor, Sam, naturally."

"Maybe I will be," Sam agreed amiably.

Dick Stebbins looked in at the kitchen door.

"Peanuts, anybody?"

"Phil's gone," Gail said.

"I'll follow him up." But Dick came in instead, and was presently illuminating the dark subject of Sam's tests with the interest of the legal mind.

"You can't get it that way. You have to sorter—sorter——"

He reached for a pencil. Gail noiselessly escaped into the dining room and secured her little playing cards. She came back to the kitchen table and began to play.

Edith matched socks thoughtfully, frowning at their stripes and selvages. The gas sang, and Dick stood up and lowered it without moving his eyes from Sam's work. Outside a cool spring wind was raising, rattling gently at the old house, sweeping new green leaves to and fro with a refreshing, swishing sound.

Gail's thoughts rocked to and fro deliciously; she was writing a story. A woman—very beautiful but entirely unprincipled—carrying on a love affair under her husband's very eyes . . .

"Gail's going down to the Chipp place in Los Gatos next week-end," Edith said, out of a silence. She regarded two socks despondently. They looked like mates. But one belonged to Phil's birthday pairs, because it had three little "x" marks stitched on it, and the other seemed to have no marks at all.

" 'Sat so?" Dick asked, looking up.

"Um-hum," Gail affirmed, nodding. She was grateful to Edith for taking it as a matter settled. Dick continued to regard her with an odd, an almost contemptuous, smile.

"You like all that sort of thing, don't you?" he now asked.

"Well, I don't know that I like it especially. I don't know much about it," Gail answered, slightly nettled. "Never having been on a house party of this sort, I couldn't say I liked it or didn't like it," she went on pointedly.

"Meaning that I don't know what I'm talking about?" Dick asked, with a not-quite-good-natured laugh.

"Well——" Gail said, with a shrug which indicated that he was at liberty to put that interpretation upon her words if he would.

"I get a great kick out of you and the higher-ups!" Dick went on, broadly grinning.

"How do you mean, higher-ups?" She played a red king sedately; her tone was even, restrained.

"You take them so damn seriously!" Dick continued.

Gail smiled mysteriously, but said nothing.

"I get a great kick out of it!" said Dick.

Edith must needs rush in with the last thing that should have been said.

"You might get more of a kick out of it if you were asked," she said. "There are no nicer people in Clippersville—and everyone knows that they give wonderful parties—and anyway—and anyway——"

"No, I don't think I'd get any more kick out of it if I were invited," Dick said. "I don't believe I would. I haven't got the clothes——"

"You swim!" Sam offered.

"Yes, I swim. But I don't play bridge. I don't talk the way they talk," Dick rambled on, unruffled. "I don't see myself in that crowd."

"Then we're *all* pleased——" Gail began icily, and stopped.

The man laughed, and sprawled a placating great hand across the table.

"Aw, don't be mad, Gail."

"I'm not mad."

"Yes, you are! But what do you care what I think of the Murchison outfit? *They* don't."

"I only think, when you don't know a person, and that person has never done one thing against you——" the girl commenced again stiffly.

"It's only that I get such a kick out of it," Dick murmured, subsiding, and going on with the aërial problem.

Gail tried her best to feel sorry for him.

Later she told Edith positively that she would not go to the Chipps' house party unless she heard directly from Mrs. Chipp.

"Oh, I am so *relieved,* dearest!" Edith breathed gratefully.

"No, it's not worth while," Gail said. She grew a little bitter, thinking about it. "It would be the best time I ever had, and if Mama had lived, or Papa, I should take *all* this sort of thing as a matter of course," she said, with dignified resentment. "However, I can't —as Phil said, I can't put myself in a false position!"

"Gail, she *will* telephone you!" Edith predicted fervently.

"I don't know." Gail was tired and blue. She had gotten into bed; her freshly brushed tawny hair was like an aureole about her square-jawed face with its heavy dark brows and wide blue eyes.

They were still talking at one o'clock when Phil came upstairs.

"I put the lights out. Everyone in?" he asked.

The sisters exchanged a look.

"Ariel *must* be! She went with the gang down to Dobbins' at about nine," Gail stammered. "She said you said she could, Phil!"

"I said if she'd be back early!" Phil exclaimed. He crossed the hall, opened a door, and returned with an anxious and angry face. "Where is she, d'you suppose?" he asked.

"Well, she must be—oh, this is perfectly terrible, Phil! She must be still down there. We could telephone——"

"Listen, she can't get away with this!" Phil interrupted. "It's after twelve. Dobbins' closes at midnight."

"Maybe one of the boys started to drive her home."

"Maybe she decided to stay at the Lovelaces'!"

"Tut-tut-tut-tut——!" Gail began on a weary note, flinging the bedclothes aside as Phil ran downstairs to the telephone and Edith fled to her room for more clothing. "Try the Lovelaces, Phil," Gail called, "and see if you can get the Gray boy at his home. He waits on the fountain at Dobbins' nights and he'd know."

Gail was all but dressed, and Phil returning from downstairs three minutes later, when Ariel appeared in the upper hallway, clad in pajamas and an old Japanese jacket of brilliantly colored cotton, with a pillow dangling in her hand and her soft, taffy-yellow hair in confusion.

"What's the excitement?" she demanded, looking like anything in the world rather than a girl who had been tearing, scared and chilly, across open country roads in a roadster exactly three minutes before. "It was so hot I thought I'd sleep down on the side porch, on the old sofa. But it's so lumpy——"

They all broke into excited laughter, reproaches. She should have told them!

Ariel, looking sleepy, warm, bewildered, vanished into her room with a yawn. Nobody followed her to discover the clothes flung wildly here and there just as they had fallen when she had torn them off, or to kiss the cheek that was still so cold from night wind. Indeed, among the three elders in Gail's room there was even a feeling that injustice had been done little

Ariel, who had run down to the drug store so innocently for a soda, after her lessons were done, and who had been home and in bed for almost three hours.

Gail could hear herself telling Miss Foster about it in the library to-morrow morning.

"And imagine, the poor little darling had been down on the porch, trying to sleep, all the while!"

"We get too suspicious!" Edith confessed penitently.

Phil produced two small round well-wrapped cakes of violet soap, and presented each girl with one.

"Peace offering," he said humbly, but with a little laugh in the corner of his eyes. "I was sort of—oh, rotten, about Gail's visit!" he said. "My dear old girl, Ede and I'd trust you to go with anyone you like to China—you know that."

It was so unexpected, so incredibly sweet, that Gail could hardly believe her ears. She drew Philip's face against hers, as he made the little speech and presentation, and he felt the firm, cool cheek wet.

"Why, we depend on you," said Phil. "You're the thing that has held us together all these years. You're the guardian angel of the Lucky Lawrences!"

Gail's heart swelled to bursting; she could not speak.

CHAPTER VIII

SHE made up her mind that she would not consider the Los Gatos week-end, unless some formal recognition of the invitation came from Mrs. Chipp. She might even say something to Van about it. "By the way, I haven't heard from your aunt. . . . Oh, by the way, Van . . ." It was always casual, always by the way. "I haven't heard from Mrs. Chipp. How do I know she expects me!"

But this heroic mood oozed away when Friday passed, and Saturday passed, and there was no sight of Van, and no word from him. Gail bore it as long as she could, and then telephoned suddenly, reluctantly, on Sunday morning to the Chipp house to ask for Mr. Murchison.

A woman's voice, slightly amused, slightly surprised, very sophisticated, answered her. Van Murchison was with friends in Burlingame, and who was this, please?

Gail dared not reveal her identity. It was Mrs. Chipp herself, she suspected; it might have been the solution of her whole problem if she had been able to ask, easily, cheerfully, "Are you expecting me on that house party next week, Mrs. Chipp?"

But she could not do it. Instead she mumbled something that might have been a name and might not, and hung up the telephone with her heart pounding and her cheeks red. Moving about the quiet Sunday kitchen, busy with the eternal dishes and chairs, bread box and pudding bowls, she raged at herself for her cowardice.

"You fool! How I hate you! You poor fool!"

She gathered the dishes expertly into the dishpan, carried the oatmeal saucepan, loaded with unappetizing scraps, to the chickens. She flew about the familiar routine; it was always a satisfaction to her to see order beginning to prevail over chaos, presently to see the floor speckless, the table bare, the enormous range brushed and cool. The battered green shades were drawn symmetrically even on the wide old windows; a tempered summer morning gloom entered the shabby room that was scented still with coffee and the odor of hot fat on the waffle irons.

Last of all the dishes. Gail carried the heavy iron kettle to the sink and poured hot water over them. She began to mop them, one by one, and lay them face downward on the blackened old grease-and-water-stained drain board. The pans and pots were long finished and put away. Gail heaped hot saucers, hot cups, over the big plates, garnished the whole with a cascading rain of knives and forks.

For the glasses, the last third of the kettleful was poured into a special small pan, and each glass dipped therein and dried separately. Wandering back and forth between sink and dresser, Gail put them one by one into a shining line on the shelf, soliloquizing as she did so.

"Burlingame, eh? I imagine I'd hate it. How can I say that?—I don't know anything about it! But I imagine—or rather, I should think a boy would hate it. I wish I hadn't telephoned. She didn't know who I was, though!

"Well, why shouldn't I telephone her? No harm done!

"Suppose she does tell him some girl telephoned, and he suspects it's me? What of it? Everybody is telephoning everybody else all the time."

Edith came in, flushed and pretty, from church.

"It's boiling out. It's going to be a marvelous day."

"It was hot when I went out at seven," said Gail.

"Oh, darling, you've got almost everything done!"

"Except our rooms."

"I did the rooms."

"Ede, really!"

"Oh, yes, when I went up to dress."

"Ariel came down and went over to Marjorie's.'

"Going to church?"

"She may. With them."

"I don't believe the Lovelaces go," Edith said, doubtfully.

"I don't believe," Gail added, "that church means one thing to Ariel!"

Edith considered this for a troubled second or two.

"No-o-o; I don't suppose it does," she conceded then, doubtfully. "Nor to Phil, either."

They were both silent for a minute. In the now completely orderly kitchen Gail had performed the morning's last rite by rinsing and wringing the dishcloth and spreading it neatly on the sink board to dry. She held her hands under the trickle of the cold-water faucet, soaped them, rubbed them with a wilted lemon, dried them on the roller towel that hung on the closet door.

"What a day for a picnic!" Edith said, with a long sigh, as they wandered through the great dim front hallway and looked through the opened front door into the mellow greenness of the garden.

"I know." Gail sighed too. The golden Sunday must be wasted, as so many were, upon dull hair washing, reading old books, flurries kitchenward at breakfast and dinner hours.

They were halfway upstairs, loitering. A voice spoke from the doorway behind them.

"Any swill this morning, ladies?"

And instantly the day burst into bloom. Edith tactfully retreated to the upper regions; Gail came out on the front steps, in her dark blue kitchen apron. Van stood there grinning up at her.

He seated himself on the steps; Gail, in a wicker rocker, had her elbows on her knees, her lemon-scented hands hooped over her face. Her eyes were very blue, her tawny-gold mop tousled and silky.

"I've just finished the dishes; I'm simply filthy. I was trying to get up my courage for a bath, and then thinking that probably Sam'll be back for late breakfast; he had to go off terribly early about something."

"Don't you ever eat lunch?"

"Not Sundays—not when we have waffles."

It was heaven, sitting out in the garden shade with this big, tweed-clad young man. She interrogated idly in her turn; somehow she felt comfortable with Van this morning. The violence of last week's hopes and fears had all faded away; it was enough to sit here together, without past or future.

"No golf to-day?"

"Oh, I could have played. But I don't play very well. The other fellers were all too good. Besides, my aunt wanted me; my cousins from Sacramento are here.

We'll play tennis at the club, and come back to a chicken dinner with ice cream."

"It sounds nice."

"It'll be rotten."

Gail laughed unsympathetically.

"We might take our supper and go up to the old dam at Cabin River," she said, as unexpectedly to herself as to him.

"How d'you get there?"

"End of the trolley line. And then walk."

He stayed about an hour, and they laughed continually. So joyous, so unstrained, was this particular meeting that Gail presently could say, "What's this house party next week-end?"

"Oh, the usual thing!"

"Down at the Chipps' place?"

"Yep. Up in the Santa Cruz mountains, back of Los Gatos. You know the new highway?"

"I know where it is."

"Well, you turn north . . ."

He drew it with a twig on the step. Gail followed the pattern with interest.

"How many will there be, Van?"

"Oh, about a dozen."

She couldn't—somehow—bring him to anything definite about the invitation. He seemed to feel that that was settled.

But Gail was in wild spirits when he went away, none the less. He had said, "I take you," in reference to the house party. His aunt must be perfectly cognizant of *that* And she, Gail, had talked to him easily, unaffectedly, in her old gingham, and he had wanted to come and find her, and her jealousy of his Burlingame friends had been silly, and everything was all right again.

Washing her hair was an adventure now, and as Dick Stebbins turned up with his reconstructed roadster, the picnic suddenly became a glittering reality. Edith and Gail, as they so loved to do, plunged into a glory of preparations, eggs boiling frantically; blackened old coffee pot stored with small packages of sugar, matches, mustard, pepper, and salt; cream poured back into a fat bottle, and secured with a thick cap of paper and a rubber band.

The afternoon was hot; the hands of the kitchen clock stood at half-past three. Not a leaf moved in the garden; pools of sunshine lay brilliant between the dark shadows of the heavy-foliaged trees.

"I love your picnics!" Edith said.

Sam turned up with a new boy, one Oliver White. Oliver was a pretty, mild-mannered boy whose "Yes, ma'am," and "No, ma'am" endeared him at once to Edith and Gail. Ariel came home, and when she sauntered out into the side yard Oliver sauntered after, and the older sisters smiled at each other.

"You don't have to teach *her* much!" Sam said.

When Phil came in the usual picnic uproar set in; they couldn't *all* go in Dick's car obviously, but those that rode going could walk-and-trolley back. Or maybe—— Or why not—— Or they didn't *have* to go to the old dam, of course.

"Stuffed eggs, sandwiches, bacon, and coffee—plenty!" Gail kept saying. "We can stop at Beers', after four, and get doughnuts."

Phil thought he might borrow Jim Slake's car—it was an awful-looking old thing, but it did move.

Gail flew up and downstairs, in and out of doors, tying strings, wiping oily fingers, tying dingy old tin cups on a string. At four they were all off, Ariel lifting hazel eyes to Oliver White for one expressionless second before seating herself on the front seat between Dick and Edith.

"I always ride with Dick, don't I, Dick?"

"Do you?" Dick asked, looking down at her with his cryptic smile. And Edith began to pray desperately that the troublesome youngest sister would marry Dick.

They picnicked on the grassy plateau two hundred feet from the dam, looking down at the world, listening to the ripple and chuckle of the creek hidden in the redwoods behind them. The sun was long set, but a gracious light lingered in the hot, still air; lights began to prick up in the soft blur of towns, far down below them, and the beetles that were motor cars bustling along the long roads showed sparks of yellow eyes.

The grass smelt of dew and pungent tar-weed; the redwoods were caught in solemn shade. Gail sat with her back braced squarely against a massive oak, Phil lay stretched with his head against her knee. Ariel and Oliver murmured near by, the others were still eating in a desultory, protestant manner.

"Gail, half a cruller?"

"Oh, don't!"

"Little hot—hot coffee, Phil?"

"It simply could not be done."

"Why is it, at a picnic, that you always eat as if the sheriff and his pack were at your heels?" Gail murmured.

Suddenly, from where he lay like a dead body in the grass, Sam's young boyish voice rose pure and strong:

"There's a long, long trail a-winding . . ."

They all sang, even Ariel cutting herself off in the middle of a word to join. They sang for half an hour.

And when they got back to the dark old close odorous house, at ten o'clock, there was a message pinned on the kitchen door. It read:

Crooks! Why didn't you wait for me?

It was signed "V. M."

So that this was one of Gail's completely happy evenings. The day had been full of pleasantness and content. Everything was exactly as it should be.

She prowled along the bookcases, took *Wuthering Heights* and *Alice Adams* and *The World's Living Religions* and *French In Ten Minutes A Day* upstairs with her, and in the end could read none of them because her thoughts carried her away from the printed pages, and were amusement, religion, education enough for this hour of spring darkness and youth and happiness.

Edith came in, carrying *More That Must Be Told, So Big, Dipper Hill,* and *The Comedies of William Shakespere,* and halted for a moment on the way to bed.

"Sometimes I think we have a lot of fun, Gail."

"Sometimes I wouldn't change places with anyone in the world," Gail answered seriously.

CHAPTER IX

MONDAY passed, with a spring rain beginning outside the library windows, and the patrons smelling of wet wool and rubber garments. Tuesday was lowering and silent; there were wet blossoms all along the sidewalks, and the new leaves dripped sullenly.

No word from Van. No sign of Van. Gail began to hope fervently that the week-end party would be postponed. Her brain—her heart were sick of the constant surging back and forth of hope and fear.

Wednesday was a frantic day, with wild wet winds whipping the puddles about on empty corner lots, and newspapers, wet and clinging, rising into the air downtown, and flapping like crazy birds among the upper stories of the shops. The library was cold and draughty; the janitor had decided for spring some days before, and could not be prevailed upon to yield a little heat from the furnace. He stood stubbornly by the desk, arguing about it. Gail heard a great deal of the old ashes; Seabright had gotten rid of them, it appeared, and the place could not properly be warmed without a new supply.

"We could each bring you a baking-powder can filled with ashes from home, Seabright, if that's all you ask!" Gail assured him, while Miss Foster, with her heaviest sweater on, laughed with chattering teeth.

"That's all right; it may be a joke and it may not, Miss Lawrence," Seabright said stubbornly.

Gail spoke to Francis Wilcox, the librarian, about going away Friday night. He looked up at her peevishly.

"Isn't it your Sunday?"

"Yes, it is. But Miss Foster . . ."

She explained it thoroughly, hating this timid little ungracious man, who was seated while she stood; who went on fingering a ledger nervously while she talked to him.

"The only thing is," he said unwillingly when she paused, "that Mrs. Wilcox—her mother gets here to-morrow, and we rather expect—at any time now——"

Gail listened dispassionately. She knew that about once in every fifteen months since their marriage eight years ago the Wilcoxes had gotten pink baskets and embroidered blankets and scales and safety pins and doctor and nurses ready for the baby who never arrived safely—who never lived. She was sorry, of course. Still, that did not seem to be a good reason why she should give up the Chipps' house party.

She said nothing. She determined to do exactly whatsoever she wanted to do.

That night Edith asked lightly, delicately, "Any news of our swain to-day?" and quite suddenly Gail told the desired lie.

"Yes. He and Mrs. Chipp came in—just for a minute."

"Oh, Gail, darling!" Gail felt her heart turn a little sick as she saw her sister's generous pleasure. "Oh, that makes it *all* right!" said Edith.

She was full of innocent curiosity about Mrs. Chipp.

"I know her, of course," said Edith. "She always comes to me for Christmas cards and books. But was she nice to you?"

"Very. We just spoke for a moment." Gail dared not turn back now. That would have been to accomplish once and for all the one thing she most feared; that would have been to give a real importance to Mrs. Chipp's invitation—or lack of one.

"But she *was* nice?"

"Oh, my yes!"

"And what'd she say about the week-end?"

"Well, just—just that she expected me."

After all, they might do just exactly that thing to-morrow, Van and his aunt, Gail reflected uncomfortably. They might easily make the lie merely an —an anticipation. She tried, meanwhile, to minimize it.

"They only stayed for a second. He had probably parked the car right across the middle of the street!"

Edith mused over it for a moment, and then said triumphantly,

"It was worth waiting for, Gail!"

Gail busied herself with dinner preparations. But Edith could not let the subject go.

"She must have come in just to see you, Gail! She wanted to have a look at you."

"Oh, no; she takes books from the library!"

"Well, of course she does. He's a trustee, or something. But how long is it since she's been in there?"

And Edith laughed significantly, as one who understood the ways of men. Ariel coming in, she instantly communicated the news, and then Gail knew it was too late to retreat. Innocent as the deception had seemed at first, it began to gather size and momentum like a rolling snowball.

"Phil, Mrs. Chipp and Van went into the library to-day to see Gail!"

Phil's fine smile, on a big square Lawrence mouth, his brotherly, interested glance.

"Oh, that's good! Now you feel all straightened out, eh?"

"Well, she didn't exactly fall all over me," Gail began to qualify it, in a secret panic.

"That doesn't matter. It's a purely formal thing."

"And believe me, I'm not going to worry about a purely formal thing!" Gail said in her rebellious heart.

But she felt ashamed of herself all evening, jumpy whenever the telephone rang, nervous whenever the casual family conversation came back to her brilliant prospects for to-morrow.

The next afternoon Van stopped his flat, open, racy-looking roadster at the library at four o'clock, and Gail descended the steps. She looked charming in her old brown coat, the fox skin Mary Tevis had given Edith, her own brown hat, Ariel's best blouse with the frill, and new chamois-skin gloves charged that day at Müller's.

Van leaped out to take her suitcase; they were laughing, delighted to be together again, as they stowed it in the rumble. Then Gail was where every girl loves to be, sunk into the comfortable slanted seat beside the man she likes, off for a holiday.

One thing had especially disturbed her among many small disturbances; it had not been a happy day. There had been the consciousness of her untruth about the invitation to begin with. There had been the allied disappointment of the fact that Mrs. Chipp had not neutralized the lie by coming into the library or sending a note. There had been Francis Wilcox's disagreeableness about her going at all; his veiled insinuation that it was all very well for Miss Lawrence, who held her position upon the trustees' favor, to consider herself above the law in this fashion if her conscience permitted, but that he, Francis Wilcox, would be bound by no such sycophant considerations.

"I feel obliged to say to you, Miss Lawrence, quite as if you were one of our other young ladies and could not depend upon any 'special influence'——" he had begun one sentence freezingly. Gail had hated him.

Then there had been the usual discouragement about clothes, fears at the very last moment that the blue velvet evening dress was not appropriate for a country-house party in May, rage because the iron had scorched Edith's chiffon scarf, and because the cleaning gasoline made a faint ring all about the place the spot had been on the brown hat.

But all of these were minor considerations when compared to the disquieting effect of a conversation Ariel had had with her older sister just before Ariel had gone off to school that morning.

Gail, flushed and pretty, with her hair fuzzy from washing, and her daintiest undergarments protected by the faithful old blue apron for breakfast-getting, had found Ariel lingering over breakfast when she had come downstairs, and Ariel, after some interested questions regarding the day's plans, had said suddenly:

"Did you notice what happened to the *Challenge* last night?"

"No," Gail had said with a puzzled, expectant glance.

"I got rid of it!" Ariel had announced in a conspirator's tone.

"Got rid of it? What for?"

"Because," Ariel had murmured, with a cautious glance about for possible eavesdroppers, "because it said that Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Chipp had gone down to their Los Gatos place on Tuesday and were opening it for the summer."

"Oh——" Gail had stammered, with a suddenly deepening color and a sickly laugh. "Oh——"

Her voice had dropped flatly. She, the mentor, the guide, the example of this little sister, had stood shamed and detected, trying to find amusing what was a most painful and humiliating moment.

"I don't blame you!" Ariel had said.

A quick protective instinct to add lie to lie had shaken Gail.

"She telephoned——" had been her first thought. And then, "It was Tuesday that she came in," had suggested itself. Said in an innocent, surprised tone, either might have served.

But she was too unused to falsehood. She had stood silent, presently saying in a troubled voice:

"I was sorry to—to have to do that. But it isn't—it isn't as if Phil were my father. He has no right—and Edith has no right——

"Neither of them," she had recommenced, with a little difficulty, "neither of them understands how much—how awfully one wants to go places—do things."

"Phil, who runs around with Lily Wibser!" Ariel had helped her scornfully. And the younger sister had given her a sudden, passionate kiss. "I love you, Gail!" Ariel had said quickly.

But this rare demonstration from cool little Ariel had brought no responsive happiness to Gail's heart. To have Ariel protecting her, abetting her in deceit, in dealing with what was not open and fair, had given her a wretched sensation that the solid ground was failing beneath her feet.

Even the scornful reference to Philip had alarmed her. After all, Phil was the head of the family; Phil was sacred. There was no law nor order anywhere if Phil was to be scorned.

All these troublesome thoughts had been tossing back and forth in her mind all day, so that by three o'clock Gail had felt desperately that nothing on earth would give her more satisfaction than to have Van telephone to say that the whole party was off. She imagined herself, under these circumstances, going in martyred quiet to Mr. Wilcox's office to say that she would be on duty to-morrow as usual; she imagined herself as picking the plums from the box of new books that were in the book room, awaiting catalogue numbers, and racing up to Müller's to break to Edith the news that she was not going to Los Gatos, she was coming home for dinner.

How Edith's sober face would brighten! How happy they would be, walking home with their books!

However, there was no telephone message. Instead, at four o'clock there was a honk from Van Murchison's dashing red-and-black roadster, outside the library, and Gail caught up her suitcase and went out to join him.

Driving along the country roads that were smothered in spring beauty, her spirits rose. Nothing could prevent her from having a week-end in a Los Gatos country house now. On Sunday evening she would join the family at the dinner table, on Monday morning she would be back at work, and everything would return to normal. But she would have this wonderful memory as so much pure gain.

She was always in a gale of high spirits when she was with Van, anyway; it was impossible to be otherwise; he was the gayest of the gay.

He laughed at everything, he made a joke of everything, his life was one long search for amusement and entertainment. He slept as late as possible every morning, he had what he liked for breakfast, and took his choice of what the day offered with one sole idea in mind: pleasure.

But why shouldn't he? Gail would sometimes ask herself, looking into the handsome, likeable face. He took fun with him wherever he went. He was not a fool, for all his frivolities. Over and over again the girl was struck by his shrewdness, by the real wisdom behind his nonsensical-sounding words.

"I know a girl in New York who gets two quarts of cream a day for her cats," he might say, "and keeps a maid for them." And then, with his endearing crooked grin he might add, "Page G. Bernard Shaw! And Shaw," Van would finish seriously, "is right, and don't you think for one second that he isn't!"

"The bad things you do you always pretend are good, and when you do a really good thing, you're ashamed of it!" Gail said to him one day. "You're enough to drive any sane person crazy!"

But she found his the most fascinating personality she had ever known, none the less. She questioned him as they drove along.

"Who else will be on this house party, Van?"

"On this souse party," Van responded cheerfully, "will be, first, mine host and his buxom wife, Dame

Martha. They will draw the ale, heap oaken logs in the great fireplaces——"

"Oh, for heaven's sake, you idiot!"

His shout of joyous laughter.

"No, there'll be the Chipps," he began again seriously, "and three or four good auction players—they have to have those. They'll play all this evening, all to-morrow morning, all to-morrow night, and all day Sunday. In between games they'll eat, drink, and ask if anyone wants to swim badly enough to take the bother of undressing.

"Then there'll be Lucia Tevis; she's a cute kid; she's eighteen. She goes East to Vassar next fall."

"Miss Mary Tevis's niece?"

"Yep. Then there's Mary Spence; she's from Boston, visiting Lucia; she's a keen girl, too. And Jim Speedwell and Fred Hunter—Fred's a polo man, but he broke his arm, so he's resting—and Bill Billings, and maybe his sister, and the Duchess—Lenore Phipps—Mrs. Phipps. She was Lenore Murchison."

"She's your half-sister?"

"Yep. Step-sister. My mother married her dad, when she was about—oh, well, she's a year younger than I am. But she's lived mostly with her grandmother. She's getting a divorce!"

"Already? It seems to me she was only married yesterday."

"She married an awful rotter. She never should have married him. I didn't get all the details, because I was away at school, but I know my mother and dad and everyone were all for Lenore. He tried to kill her one night."

"Oh, horrors!" Gail said. But she felt no real sympathy for the unknown Lenore.

They drove through Los Gatos, sleepy in late afternoon sun and ringed with wooded hills, and turned southwest on the boulevard that led to the ocean, twenty-six miles away. The car mounted slopes, rolled smoothly under mighty oaks, left the paved highway for a comfortable dirt road.

Few houses were visible now. But the gates bore names: "El Nido," "Hillways," "Jackson Farm Road," "Hidden Paradise Road." The gate into which Van at last turned the car was marked with several signs: "Murchison Farm Road. A. E. Chipp." "No Admittance. A. E. Chipp." "No Fires." "No Thoroughfare." "Keep Out. A. E. Chipps." "No Shooting Over This Property. A. E. Chipp." And, like an afterthought, the name, "Far Niente."

"Page Mr. Shaw!" said Gail with a laugh, reading them. Van cast her a side glance.

"Mr. Shaw," he said simply, "would be sick at his stomach."

He drove about the shoulder of a hillside neatly planted to prune trees, and down a slope toward a heavy forest of oaks, redwoods, and bays, plentifully interspersed with smaller growths of madrone and buckeye. Gardens and roads and forest were broken here with patches of lawn, and with perhaps ten or a dozen cottages. Bits of roof and awninged windows were visible on all sides; smoke rose from a kitchen chimney into the afternoon sunshine.

There were fruit trees here, too, scattered in among the natural forest trees; there was a tennis court, dappled with shade and light and draped in a banksia rose vine heavy with golden bloom. Flower scents were everywhere, beauty was everywhere. Below the mountainside on which the cabins were perched a canyon fell steeply away, its sides clothed in rising files of redwoods. Beyond, the west and the ocean flamed together.

Under a loaded rose vine, on one of the porches, four persons were playing bridge. Gail, as she and Van approached, recognized one of these as her hostess.

Mrs. Chipp looked up at them sharply, and without changing her position concentrated her cards in her left hand and stretched a hand toward Van.

"Oh, hello, dear! How d'you do, Miss Lawrence?" she said, in a quick aside. "Van, they're all swimming, and there's nobody here to—— Excuse me just one second, Hilyer," she interrupted herself, speaking to one of the players. "Van," she went on, "I'm not sure where the Duchess has put Miss—Miss Lawrence. But you take her up to the girls' cottage and just let her park herself somewhere until the Duchess explains. Will you do that, like a darling?"

Resolutely, Gail would not let herself feel that it was rude, that it left anything unsaid, undone.

"I'll be all right!" she said, with a smile and a nod, walking off with Van. Mrs. Chipp made no answer; she was saying absorbedly, "Partner, you'll kill me when you see what I've raised on. But I felt so sure of your spades. We're down about a million. The minute they doubled I knew that you were counting on me for . . ."

Van led the way to one of the cabins, a brown, enchanting place with geraniums and lobelia in the window boxes, and a wide open door into a central sitting room.

"Take any of these rooms—gosh, they're all full of suitcases!" Van said, peering in at doorways. "Here

—here's one—this must be you. Make yourself comfortable. Are you going to swim?"

"I think not. Not—well, maybe I will!"

She decided against the swimming, and walked out to meet Van, ten minutes later, looking her prettiest in a white frock, white shoes, a white hat.

The boy lingering in the garden path, waiting for her, was trim in a black bathing suit, with a towel across his shoulders. They went up toward the swimming pool together, hearing, as they approached it, the oddly echoing sound of laughter and voices near water.

Boys and girls, as wet and sleek as seals, were sprawled in the late sunshine on the grassy ramp beside the pool. They were drinking a pale yellow drink from tall ice-filled glasses; a cocktail shaker stood on the grass.

A girl immediately got up and hurled herself dripping at Van, who flung her instantly into the pool, leaping after her himself just before the hands and feet of several of the others could assist him in the plunge. A general scrimmage ensued, with much shrieking.

When this quieted down Gail found herself the only seated person, the only dry person, and the only person who was not drinking, in the group. The circumstances seemed to alienate her from them. She listened, smiled, made herself appear at ease, as a low-toned conversation that had evidently been interrupted was begun again among the girls.

The men merely rolled in the sun, yawned, and exchanged monosyllables.

"You did not." "Quit that!" "Say, listen . . ." Gail heard, over and over again.

The girls, Lucia, Mary, and Lenore, murmured interestedly.

"Well, Clancy did it for her."

"She said Clancy did!"

"Yes, Clancy did! I know it, Duchess, because she told me Clancy said she would make an exception of her and do it for her."

"Yes, she designed that and the red dress she wore on Sunday. Didn't you see the red dress she wore on Sunday? . . . Clancy did that. She designed that red dress. You were at the club on Sunday, weren't you? . . . She had it on. Last Sunday. Was that before you came? . . . She says Clancy says that she'll do her a dress a year, and Gertrude brought Clancy a forty-dollar bottle of perfume last year, and then Clancy wouldn't even see her this year! I think she's a savage. They say Madame Alicia is doing much smarter things than Clancy, anyway."

"I don't like Alicia one bit."

"Oh, I like Alicia. Alicia does some things wonderfully! Alicia told Gertrude that Clancy used to work for her, and that she threw her out."

"Oh, come on," said the Duchess suddenly when there had been a good deal of this. "We'll never get dressed!"

Immediately they were all running down the path to the cabin, Gail with them. The only one who took any notice of her was the Boston girl, named Mary Spence. Mary, who was rather serious-looking, with long straight dark hair drying on her thin shoulders, spoke now and then kindly to Gail as they all began a flurry of dressing for dinner.

They left their bedroom doors open and ran back and forth lightly clad or not clad at all. Lenore and

Lucia shed their bathing suits on the strip of lawn outside the cabin, and slipped into thin cotton kimonos, brief and almost transparent, to wander about brushing their hair, rubbing themselves with towels, and gathering garments and cosmetics.

Gail, who was not going to change, sat on the upper porch step a few feet above the path and stared at the beauty and luxury of Far Niente as it lay on the slope below her, and pretended to be satisfied and absorbed in what she saw. Already she knew several things that she had not known when she had left Clippersville at four o'clock this afternoon, things that might have prevented her coming at all. But it was too late for that now; she must get what she could out of this experience and get home and enjoy what memories she could and forget the rest—and that was all there was about it.

She knew now that all the vague, shy fears she had felt in anticipating this visit were going to be more than justified. She knew that Mrs. Chipp was not going to be nice to her, that the girls were entirely indifferent to her, and that she should not have come.

Her clothes were not right, her training was not right, her background was not right. She simply did not belong here, and they were all more or less conscious of it. This nice Mary Spence, herself a stranger in the group, was being cordial merely on general principles. It was nothing to her that these Californians had social distinctions between themselves; they were all the same to Mary Spence.

On the top step Gail thought it all out. Meanwhile the beauty of the last hour of a summer day lay unnoted before her troubled eyes. It was barren desert for all she knew.

All about the cabin were scattered fruit trees into which roses had climbed. To the south lay the tennis court and the swimming pool; on the north the forest descended steeply into the great canyon, beyond which were lines of great mountains shouldering others away in turn.

Just before her, at the end of the path, were groups of redwoods set in circles, the enormous velvety brown trunks rising as straight as masts into the air. Below them, incredibly insignificant, were little strips of lawn and garden, fences, trellises, and the low roofs and awnings of the cabins.

The air here in the high mountains was thick with sweetness, like a piny anesthetic. The sun was gone from the earth now, and the canyons were filled with purple light. But far up in the redwood branches that were spread in dark green layers upon layers, bright red-gold sunlight still lingered and dripped, and on an especially high hilltop that closed in the scene like a dimly painted back drop, there was bright sunshine still lying among the oaks and the dried grassy patches and on the level of the chaparral.

"I shall have to work!" Gail told herself grimly. She must work, talking, smiling, keeping herself occupied, for all this endless evening and all to-morrow and most of Sunday. It sounded like an eternity.

Suddenly she noted two of her companions in the cottage, Lucia and Lenore, walking with the two boys named Bill and Jim, down the path to the house. They must have left the cottage by the back door, which faced toward the men's cabin. Perhaps the boys had called them.

That left only Mary in the house, and if she also slipped away Gail would have to go down to dinner, at some spot unknown, all alone. Her heart began to beat hard in nervous anticipation.

Presently a middle-aged woman came up the path toward her, and with a not unamiable half smile for Gail stood still, a few feet away, calling, "Mary!" Gail recognized her as one of the card players.

"Yes, Mrs. Billings!" Mary called, putting her head out of the porch door.

"Mary, you know what I asked you to do?" the woman said.

"Oh, yes!" Mary answered.

"Will you do it now, dear?"

"Oh, yes; instantly!" said Mary, running out of the cabin with the soft skirts of her flowered crêpe gown blowing about her knees, and her dark hair in order. She and Mrs. Billings, conferring, went rapidly down the path together. Gail swallowed once, with a dry throat. Then she got up and began to saunter slowly after them.

She encountered the boy named Fred Hunter in the path, and fell upon him with all the boldness of desperation. She laughed with him, narrowed her blue eyes in their thick black lashes at him, and when he said somewhat nervously that he had been going up to the cabin to wake Van whose aunt felt sure he had fallen asleep, Gail said gaily that she would go too.

They awakened the drowsy, surprised Van, and they all laughed together, and Gail, still holding firmly to the now manageable Fred, waited for Van on the porch of the men's cabin. She walked down to the house between the two of them, disposing of Van's good-natured attempts to shake young Mr. Hunter by a determined, if light, hold upon the latter's arm.

At dinner, which began immediately, she was between the two young men. So far so good.

But it was work. It was bitter, hard, endless work; all struggle, no relaxation anywhere. She was conscious of carrying a heavy handicap.

The girls were all against her. They ignored her; they looked bored when she spoke; they deliberately carried the conversation into channels where she must be ill at ease and unfamiliar. They talked of persons and events that meant nothing to Gail, of European watering places, of polo; they used French words, Italian words to express fine shades of meaning.

Gail fought on. Her cheeks blazed, her blue eyes shone. She lost all consciousness of Van as the man for whom she was beginning to care, of the beauty of the place and the summer night, of the novelty of dining here with these fashionable folk. It was all a blur, through which she was determined to hold her own despite them all.

When Lenore, at the end of the long meal, during which they had all eaten, drunk, and smoked too much, said provocatively to Van something about needing him to conspire with her upon something that would surprise the others, Gail countered by saying that she and Mr. Hunter wanted to get up a charade.

"That's what they call it now, is it?" one of the boys said, and Gail joined in the loud laughter. The infatuated Hunter was by this time incapable of any emotion, even surprise, and he and Gail went down to a marble bench on the lawn, where she held him as long as she could, listening to his fatuous vague words, and laughing and keeping him laughing as if it were the greatest fun in the world. Later she annexed Bill

Billings, and fell into a deep-toned conference with him about airmen and air records, straining herself to remember everything that Phil and Sam and Dick had said about them, and pretending to be so absorbed in the conversation that when Van came to get her to dance she had to call a few last words over her shoulder to Bill.

"But he didn't have a fair break on that test!"

"You bet your life he didn't!" Bill shouted back.

They were dancing on a sort of platform, with vines trailed up over its latticed top. The moon shone down between the leaves, the radio droned and choked and droned again. Gail danced well, and loved dancing, and was happy for a few minutes.

Suddenly they were all disputing as to whether they should play bridge or go down to Mockerson's. Mockerson's was a roadhouse over on the Halfmoon Bay road, sixty miles away.

"Come on, let's go dance at Mockerson's! Maybe the place'll be raided."

"Not for me!" Gail said firmly, with a little laugh.

"Oh, why not? It's a sweet place; it's always in the newspapers," Bill Billings pleaded heavily. "There isn't a church in the country that's in the newspapers as much. You can't say anything against Mockerson's."

"It's an awful place!" Gail argued, as he paused.

"I've never been there," Lenore said, with the faintest stress on the pronoun.

"Oh, well, neither have I!" Gail said, laughing. Instantly, as a brief second of pause intervened, she hated herself.

"I am the captain of my fate, folks, I am the master of my soul!" Van observed, rising with a wine glass in his hands. "In the fell clutch of circumstance, what d'you think I do? D'you think I wince, or cry aloud? I don't——"

He was hauled down.

"Well, do we go to Mockerson's?"

"Listen. Let's not, and say we did!"

"Well, I'll tell you a story!" Jim Speedwell said unexpectedly. He told it.

For a moment Gail could not see the point. Then it came upon her with sickening force, and she felt choked and a little nauseated. The men roared; the girls laughed briefly, and Lenore said, "Jim, don't be so revolting!"

"You low swine!" Lucia Tevis, who was eighteen years old, added affectionately.

Mary, who happened to be engaged to the entertaining Jim, by an arrangement infinitely gratifying to her entire family—for Jim, after all, was one of the baking-powder Speedwells—said, "Now don't encourage him, or he'll go on!"

"I know another," volunteered Jim. There was a chorus of "Shut up!" but he told the second story none the less.

"Well, what can you do?" Gail asked herself fiercely. She couldn't shame Van by getting up and walking away from the group. Her face burned wretchedly for half an hour.

The men had begun to show the effect of all they had been drinking; not a rational word was said now. Gail fought on.

She would not give in. She would not give in. She slept, waked, breakfasted, went to luncheon at some club in whose chintzy dressing room the girls were notably rude to her, watched her first polo game. She would not give in.

Fight, fight, fight. She made herself pretty, she made herself amusing, she fought back the constant impulse to say, "Oh, Van, take me home!" No, no, no! This was her chance; she would not lose it. She grew almost feverish, her clear skin unusually pale, her blue eyes unusually bright, and was the prettier for it. She talked to strangers determinedly, on the grandstand, at the club—talked of greens and irons and chukkers.

Van saw nothing. He was in great spirits, rushing from one thing to another—cocktails, bridge, tennis, swimming, polo, golf—at breakneck speed. By Saturday night all these were exhausted, radio and Victrola had done their worst, and it was decided that Mockerson's offered the only possible amusement.

This was at about nine o'clock. Into cars they all accordingly piled, and off into the night they went. Lenore was with Van in the front seat of the roadster, Gail and Fred Hunter in the rumble. But Van had been nice to Gail just in the last hour, had given her the sort of affectionate attention she had been living for, and his discontented, "Why'd you fix it that way, Lenore? Why don't I ever get my girl?" more than consoled Gail. She was reconciled not only to their distribution on the trip, but to the idea of going to Mockerson's at all.

Another dreary dressing room, after the cold run, and the girls powdering their noses, reddening their lips again. Another bleak-looking table with a limp spotty cloth on it. They were all so tired they almost laid their heads on the cloth, and Gail was scared when she saw the hip flasks and the red wine again. Van had driven like a crazy man on those steep circuitous roads coming over; he certainly would not be in a condition to drive more carefully going back. Of course, they would get back to the ranch somehow, but it was frightening.

Funny to think of herself as home again to-morrow night, playing solitaire. Well, one thing was sure; if she ever married Van Murchison or anyone like him she would cure him of this sort of craziness.

She looked at him, beside her at the table, and thought that he was much the best-looking, much the nicest of them all. He was too fine for this kind of thing. Any man would be ruined by too much of it.

Mockerson's was as dull as ditch water to-night. There were parties in the curtained alcoves, shouting and singing, but the main room was empty. A heavy fog was rolling in from the sea; the motor cars that went by made a muffled sound in the dark night.

The floor was dirty, the walls were dirty. Cigarette smoke was heavy in the air; the place reeked of stale wine. Soap filigrees decorated the mirrors, and old-fashioned paper streamers and rosettes festooned the filthy ceiling.

"I wonder if we're all crazy, Van, to race one hundred and twenty miles for this?"

"Of course we are!" He shook his head. "This is an awful place," he said, in the sensible undertone she liked so much. "The higher the fewer, do you get me?" Van asked, with a glance at the ceiling. "There are rooms up there . . ."

Gail paled, and felt her throat thicken. One knew of such things, of course. One was not often in close touch with them.

"Here's the way I work it out," Van said. "Our immediate ancestors used to come down here on bicycles, or by trains and walking, or on horseback, and they got ravenously hungry, and they came in here and found that you could eat yourself out of shape for a dollar—soup, salad, spaghetti, sour bread, chicken, and all good, see? And they leaped out and told the world that there was no food like Mockerson's. But we—effete children of a new generation———"

"You're absolutely right, Van!" she said, half laughing and half serious.

"Well, I am. Because, you see, we never get hungry! We don't need all this food."

They were all getting quieter in the heat and smoke, and under the influence of the heavy rich food. In an occasional pause they could hear the sea beating—beating on the distant rocks.

"You're awful cute!" Van said affectionately, covering her hand with his own.

The noisy party stumbled out of an alcove and scattered wearily toward dressing rooms for wraps.

"We ought to be going, too!" Lenore decided. "This is too awful!"

They stumbled up in their turn, staggered up the smelly, unpainted stairs to the odorous, damp, bleak dressing room. Its window, on this raw night, was wide open, the salty air blowing in deliciously cold and fresh.

"This won't do!" Gail said, going to close it. Standing beside it, both hands raised to the center sill, she looked down at a pool of bright light from the tavern doorway below. Motor lights, house lights were shining fully on the stumbling, stupid party that had preceded them from the dining room.

"Come here, Duchess. That's the color hair I mean!" Lucia said suddenly, at Gail's elbow, also looking down. "Ash blonde—that's a real one, too. Look!"

Gail looked, too. Looked down at the bareheaded, loudly laughing girl a big raccoon-coated man was helping into a roadster. She recognized the ash-blonde hair, the curve of soft cheek.

It was Ariel.

CHAPTER X

GAIL had a sick moment of vertigo, of terror. What she saw, what it signified, where she was and where Ariel was—everything rushed together in a complete demoralization of mind and senses.

She remained at the window, still holding tightly to the sash that she had pushed automatically downward. The lights in the black night below her wheeled and flashed; engines roared, the cars were gone.

After awhile she turned and dazedly reached for her brown coat and buttoned its belt about her. She followed the other girls downstairs, not knowing where she was nor what she was doing. Always her hands shook and her lips trembled.

There had been a rearrangement, and she was next to Van on the drive home. The cars shot away into the foggy night; the big engines throbbed on the grade. Their lights made a yellowish tunnel before them; strange shadows rose and wheeled about them as they went.

When they reached the top of the long rise, and the machines could run quietly, cautiously, through the enveloping thick mists, Gail spoke for the first time.

"Van, you saw those men and the two girls—the ones who were making so much noise?"

She hesitated. She could not go on and betray Ariel! An agony of helplessness silenced her.

"Didn't notice 'em specially—why?" Van shouted.

"Oh, nothing!" Gail, actually writhing, saying the soundless words of prayers with trembling lips, added no more. But her soul was sick.

She needed sympathy, needed it desperately. She needed help, advice. But she could not get it here.

"Ariel! Oh, my God—not yet eighteen!"

Then night and fog and the exploring lights of the car and her own sick, heavy heartbeats again.

It was like a horrible dream. She was miles—miles from home, from Phil and Edith, and security and goodness and help. She was not even going home now; she was going back to Far Niente, where they would all gather in the pantry for drinks and sleepy, dull jokes.

The need to be at home gnawed at her flesh like teeth; her face burned, she could not breathe.

"Van, how far are we from home?"

"From Los Gatos? Let's see——"

"No. From Clippersville."

"Oh, Clippersville? Oh—well, about—about seventy miles."

Seventy miles! They seemed to fall on her heart like so many separate blows. Was somebody driving Ariel seventy miles home to-night? What was she doing, away from home? Where did Phil and Edith think she was? Perhaps Phil and Edith were dead. . . .

The nightmare went on and on. Van was happily conversational now, but that only seemed part of it. Gail was mad with anxiety, burning with fever. His words merely fretted her.

Perhaps Phil and Edith were scouring the town for

Ariel, telephoning Dorothy, telephoning the Lovelaces! And she not there!

"Papa told us to take care of the children! And little Ariel, that Mother only stayed with four days——!

"And what does Ariel know about danger? Nothing. She's a baby. Men think she's pretty, and it amuses her. She never dreams . . .

"Oh, my God! Where is she now?"

It was impossible that twelve hours must pass before she could be home again and know the worst. Hours—hours! They proved to be the longest through which she had ever lived.

Vaguely, secondary things penetrated the flaming wall of thought that shut her in. She realized, alone in her comfortable cabin room, that she was not going to sleep. The clock's hands now stood, oddly enough, at the half hour after three. Darkness outside, so it was night. She was up on the Chipps' ranch, wakeful in the night. They had gone to Mockerson's. . . .

Ariel! Ariel! Ariel!

She walked out under the redwoods just as dawn began to paint the western face of the canyon with streaks of vermilion. The grass on the lawns was soaked with dew; her feet left a silvery trail across it. Birds were noisy in the madrones.

Then she must have gone back and flung herself on her bed and fallen asleep, for she was awakened by the other girls' laughter and voices at ten, and roused herself, stiff and half sick, with heavy eyes and chilled wet feet. She took a hot shower in the deserted cabin, for she was shivering in the balmy summer morning, and crept down to the main cabin for breakfast only anxious to avoid notice, to secure the earliest possible escape for home.

This attitude, perhaps, the indifferent, absent mood, was what she might successfully have taken all the time. Everyone was nice to her now; she was suddenly one of themselves. Van moved his place to sit next to her, and even the haughty Lenore said thoughtfully, as she admiringly studied Gail's pale face:

"I simply adore that shadowy, Russian sort of skin!"

They were all going up to San Mateo, for it appeared that Van was to take the place of a missing polo player; everyone was very much excited about the game. It would all have been smooth sailing today.

But she was in a fever to get home. Van's arguments, his pleading, fell on deaf ears. Ariel perhaps murdered, Phil and Edith crushed with terror and doubt, and they wanted her to go to San Mateo and applaud the chukkers of a polo game!

"Come on, be a sport! We'll leave the club the minute the game is over," Van said persuasively, looking very handsome in his loose flannels, with his burned face Indian brown by contrast. "I'll have you home by eight o'clock."

"I've got to send someone over for some things," his aunt added, hospitably. "I can send a message to your sister?"

"I'll go with whomever you send!" She leaped at the chance. She could hear nothing else, think of nothing else, but home.

In the end she had her way, and was established in the roomy empty back of the big closed car, with

Mason and Annie on the front seat. Van saw her off reproachfully.

"You piker!"

"I know it." She smiled a sickly smile at the handsome boy whose white, athletic figure was set against a background of redwoods, flowers, awnings, roses—everything that could make a mountain home beautiful.

"Why don't you stay and swim, anyway. It's noon; you'll cook—driving home through the valley!"

"I can't. I promised Ariel——"

"Oh, Ariel nothing! Listen, I got one good look at your little sister, and I want to tell you something! She can manage her own affairs."

Her face, already pale with heat and emotion, grew whiter.

"How d'you mean you—you saw Ariel?"

"Why——" He looked at her in puzzled surprise. "Why, she was at your house that Sunday night, two weeks ago."

He had not seen her at Mockerson's then! Gail sank back.

"Come on, have a change of heart, and let's swim! And then we'll go up to San Mateo."

His laughter, the grip of his big brown hand, would have been irresistible twenty-four hours ago. But Gail was hardly conscious of them now. Absently, apologetically, she persisted, said her farewells.

The world that was all pleasure—swimming, bridge, polo, tennis, frocks, trips—closed behind her as a pool closes over a stone. The big car rumbled down into the scorching heat of the valley, floundered for a few miles on dirt roads, and reached the highway, to take its place meekly in the long file of Sunday traffic.

Oranges were banked at the sides of the road, under shed roofs—cherries, apricots, strawberries. Greasy hot food, sausages and meat cakes, waffles and chicken scented the burning air. The orchards were dry under the files of fruit trees.

"Dumbarton Bridge 9 Miles," the signs said. And when they reached Dumbarton they would barely be started!

Well, she would be home before three o'clock. She must be patient. Two minutes past one. She asked Mason if his clock was right. "Yes, miss," said the pleasant English voice. Two minutes past one. She could bear anything for two hours!

She would be rushing into the old house—and what a haven of rest and coolness and ease it would be!—at three o'clock. She would find Phil there, haggard and wild, Edith stricken, Sam making frightful suggestions about dragging the river and notifying the police.

"We Lawrences can never hold up our heads after this again," she thought. Not that it mattered, if Ariel, frightened and sobered, were home, were safe!

Thirty miles more! Her face was burned by the hot wind, and her head splitting. Twenty miles—ten miles. The big gas tank came into view, the red mills, the canneries, and finally the swimming treetops of Clippersville, from which dazzling lines arose like hairs of white fire. The summer wind was whining, crying over all, the side roads sent up clouds of dust when motors swooped into them in passing.

Gail's heart was suffocating her. She said only incoherent farewells, as she descended from the back seat into the heavenly green shadiness of the old garden, and catching up her heavy suitcase ran for the side door.

On the threshold of the quiet, shaded kitchen she stopped short. Edith was sharing a light refection of artichokes and bread pudding with a book, *Martin Chuzzlewit*. Ariel, dainty and cool, was sitting at the other end of the kitchen table, cleaning gloves in gasoline.

For a moment revulsion of feeling made Gail feel actually dizzy and weak. But if Ariel saw anything amiss her smile of surprise and welcome gave no sign of it, and Edith's delight covered all other emotions for a space.

"Oh, Gail, we didn't expect you until suppertime! Oh, darling, did you have a good time? Was it fun? I've been thinking and thinking—but you've not had lunch!"

Edith was in her arms, was racing about the kitchen eagerly, mixing iced tea, taking rolls from the old black japanned bread box. Ariel got up from the table to come and bestow one of her strange kisses. Gail, seated, her hat pushed off her damp, pale forehead, felt that she was still in the dream, and that things had shifted themselves about on all sides, strangely, as they did in dreams.

"But tell us, tell us, tell us!" Edith pleaded.

"And what'd you do last night?" Gail could finally ask, when the swimming pool, the frocks, and the general excitement of Far Niente had been pretty generally reviewed. Edith was still lamenting that Gail had not gone on with the crowd to the polo match.

"I knew you expected me here for supper, Ede."

"Oh, but *darling!* As if we wouldn't much, *much* rather have had you have your fun!"

"You're so lovely," Gail said in sudden passion, tears in her eyes, as she looked across the table at the gentleness, the affection, the loyalty that were Edith. Edith caught the hand eagerly, and the two laughed at each other through wet lashes.

Edith was pretty, with her brushed dark tawny hair, heavy brows, and clear skin; she was intelligent. But Gail saw something more this morning. She saw goodness, fineness, radiating from her younger sister like an aura.

"And my dear, Ariel was with Dorothy Camp. So the boys and I had to console each other last night!"

Gail gave Ariel her big-sisterly, sympathetic smile.

"Was that fun?" she asked, feeling that it was somebody else talking, that it was all a part in a play—in one of their Sunday night charades.

"Fun! They stayed at the Fairmont," said the eager Edith.

"Oh, did you, baby?"

"We went to a movie," Ariel supplied.

Then—then the girl at Mockerson's wasn't Ariel? Or else . . . Gail's first impulse to tell her sisters of her sickness and fright died away. She dared not risk that yet.

But she felt quieter. The iced tea was soothing, the rolls crisp, Ariel here safe and sound anyway. Edith offered her half the bread pudding, but Gail declined it and went seeking her own refreshments in the old ice box: a saucer of stewed strawberries, a cube of stale gingerbread.

Peace and shadiness held the kitchen. Ariel was expecting some boy friend for supper; Edith was going to walk over to Mrs. Appleby's at five o'clock to ask about the fiesta dresses; Sam was working; Phil had said that he must go to the office.

"Which I shrewdly suspect is Thomas Street Hill!" Edith confessed ruefully.

Home. The infinite peacefulness of it! Gail, looking at Ariel, could not believe that her feverish, frightened suspicions of last night had had any basis whatever. This was all reassuring, all soothing.

The kitchen was quiet, and the big house and the dense garden all about it seemed asleep. And beyond these were the quiet town streets, shaded by great maples, elms, and locusts that were now in heavy new leaf, and the lawns and gardens with the sprinklers whirring in the afternoon heat, and peaceful shabby rooms full of quiet Sunday folk who had had fried chicken and ice cream for dinner, and would presently descend in the twilight to search out jam and salad and crackers for supper.

It was not believable that this innocent child of seventeen, in the blue organdy, had upon her mind any secret as disgraceful as a midnight escapade at Mockerson's.

But as soon as they had an opportunity to speak to each other alone, Gail went straight to the point.

"Ariel, did you ever hear of a roadhouse called Mockerson's?"

The blonde head, with its drift of flyaway gold hair, came up like a flash. And Gail knew.

Ariel pursed her lips as if she were going to whistle, for a second. Then she shrugged slightly, wary eyes on Gail's face.

"Yep," she admitted briefly.

Then there was a long silence. Ariel's eyes met her sister's.

"Some of us went over from the Chipp ranch," Gail said, returning the steady gaze. "What were you doing there, Ariel?"

The tone was dispassionate, quiet. But Gail's breast rose and fell once, on a heavy sigh.

"What—what *you* were, if you were there and saw me, I suppose!" Ariel blurted, in a tone that was meant to be bold, and turned out merely trembling and frightened.

Gail took the shock without a sign, going on patiently.

"Who were you with, dear?"

"Oh, don't *dear* me!" protested Ariel, in sudden ugliness. "You know you think I'm a lost soul, and you're going to tell Phil, and stir up all sorts of trouble."

She stopped fiercely, as Gail merely sat, silent, looking into space with her burning blue eyes sick with trouble and doubt.

From vague worry and apprehension about Ariel, suddenly the whole fearful danger had sprung upon her. This morning it had been no more than fear; now it was full knowledge. Gail's spirit sank and failed under the weight of it.

"You weren't in San Francisco with the Camps, then?"

"Oh, yes, I was! We went down from there."

"Where was Mrs. Camp?"

"She had to go to San Rafael. She left us at the Fairmont."

"Just you two girls? Did she know you went out that night?"

"We didn't tell her—no."

A pause. "Dorothy lies to her mother?" Gail then asked, painfully.

Ariel jerked an impatient blonde head. Yet she seemed glad to be talking about it, too.

"All the girls do."

The older sister raised heavy eyes from deep brooding.

"All the girls——?"

"Lie to their mothers," Ariel finished it simply.

There was another pause. Then Gail said, "Ariel, I can't believe it!"

"*You* were there," Ariel offered accusingly.

"Oh, I know it!" Gail covered her face with her hands. "And I knew I shouldn't have gone!" she whispered, as if thinking aloud.

For the first time the younger sister seemed a little impressed, and she spoke in a lower tone, a tone that had some hint of huskiness or of apology in it.

"If it makes it any—better, we all thought that was a horrible place and that we'd never go there again!"

"You haven't been there before?"

Ariel could even laugh.

"Oh, goodness, no! We just happened, we happened—— Here, I'll tell you how it was!" She leaned forward, locking her hands about her knees. It was five o'clock; Gail was in Ariel's room. Edith had gone to keep her appointment. Ariel was in pajamas, and had been resting. Gail, herself in pajamas, cold-creaming her burned face and brushing her dust-thick hair, had seized the earliest opportunity to come in for a talk.

"Here's how it was," said Ariel. "Mrs. Camp and Dorothy were going in to the city on the ten o'clock yesterday morning, to do some shopping and stay overnight, because Mrs. Camp wanted to hear someone preaching at church this morning. See? So they asked me to go, and Mrs. Camp was going to see her aunt in San Rafael, so she said that Dot and I could have lunch together, and go see a movie. Well, at about five we were back at the hotel cleaning up, and she telephoned and said that her aunt was so sick she was going to stay in San Rafael, and we could get four Orpheum seats and ask two boys to go with us. So we were sort of telephoning around for boys, and we got Buddy Raisch and his roadster. Well, that was about all there was to it! Buddy said we could get a grand shore dinner at Mockerson's about ten, if we went to the movie first. But I didn't realize it was forty miles away, and that it would be so foggy."

The horror that had held Gail in a vise since midnight of the night before began to loosen and fade; she could breathe again.

"So you went back to the Fairmont?"

"Certainly we did!"

"What time did you get there?"

"About one."

Gail reflected a few minutes, the heavy dark Lawrence brows drawn together in a frown.

"Ariel, you're only seventeen. Do you think men respect a girl who goes about with them at all hours of night, unchaperoned, to places like that?"

It was the younger sister's turn to ponder.

"No, I don't," she conceded unexpectedly.

"And don't——" Gail was trying to be temperate, trying to be patient. No use fighting with the old weapons of reproach and threat, here. This was a new situation. "Don't you want men to respect you, Ariel?" she asked.

"I want to have a good time," Ariel said simply.

"The girls men respect," she added, in a silence, "don't have a good time."

Gail covered her face in her hands again and leaned back in her chair.

"You were Mother's poet!" she whispered.

"You don't think I *like* it?" Ariel countered, reddening resentfully.

"Men," Ariel began again presently, as Gail was silent—"men aren't looking for good, pure, womanly women these days, and don't you fool yourself that they are, Gail! Men want girls to run around with them, and not to be afraid of being kissed——"

"Stop, you make me sick!" the older sister said sharply.

"Well, it's true. How many men do you know who are going after girls like Ede—paying calls, discussing ideals? Not one! That went out with David Copperfield and Adam Bede!"

"And you think," Gail began, warming, "you think you can build a lovely, dignified married life on running round to places like Mockerson's, smoking and drinking, and letting disgusting half-grown boors like Buddy Raisch kiss you?"

"No, I don't," Ariel responded promptly, in the pause. "But I say it's the only way you can have a good time, and I want to live, while I'm young!"

"Having a good time by letting these boys, who are nothing but animals, do just as they please!"

"Well, at least," Ariel said cuttingly, "my idea of a good time on a Sunday afternoon isn't to go consult old Mrs. Appleby about the fiesta costumes!"

Gail, thinking of good little Edith plodding under the green trees of the quiet streets in the afternoon heat, winced and fell silent with sheer pain and dismay.

"You know I love Ede!" Ariel apologized sulkily.

"Oh, I know you do," Gail answered quickly, tears in her eyes, her throat thick. Her heart was lead. "Just the same, you're not right, Ariel," she persisted. "Honor is what—well, what it always was—and dignity and self-control. If we turn ourselves into animals, we only have to work our way back to decency, sooner or later. Gluttony in food isn't any more expensive than—than developing appetites for—for—other things——"

"I know what you mean," Ariel relieved her briefly.

"Surely—surely no sane girl could think that the sort of marriage that goes on now, with jazzing and fighting and divorce——" Gail began eloquently. "Surely no girl thinks that is worth while! Why, girls like that are burned out at twenty. Their lives are over! They're fit for nothing! They go on for a few years . . ."

"Gail, you're old-fashioned," Ariel presently observed, without ill feeling. "It doesn't matter what—what comes of it. You have to live! And you don't live when you stick at home, waiting for splendid young men to come after you! Because they simply *don't come!*"

"Nonsense! Ariel, at your age," the older sister said, with sudden conviction, "to go on as you are going on, is simple ruin."

"And if I sit down at home, then what is it? Why, Gail," Ariel said, in a confident voice, "I'm no fool! I'm not taking any chances."

"Taking any chances!" Gail echoed, rolling up her eyes. There was a pause.

"Now listen, Gail," Ariel began again, in deadly earnest. "You had to lie, to get off on this Chipp party, didn't you?"

Gail was checked.

"I'm not proud of it," she said presently, in a shamed voice.

"Why shouldn't you be proud of it? There was nothing wrong in that party. Only you found out that if it depended upon a formal invitation from Mrs. Chipp you simply wouldn't go. Didn't you? Didn't you?"

"Phil isn't my father, after all," Gail offered hesitatingly, unwillingly.

"Nor mine! But Gail," Ariel went on, more confidently, aware that she was gaining ground, "we can't get away from it, we can't have any fun here *unless* we take chances! Nobody could get away with anything in this town. Just as soon as I can I'm going to get out, and I advise you to! Why, what does it matter," she rushed on—"what does it matter what Van Murchison wants—how much he wants to fool around, how young a kid he is? He's rich, he's going to take his wife East, and abroad. What do you care about the rest? He never says a sensible word or does a sensible thing. What do *you* care? You play his game! You don't want to change him, you want to marry him. Let him be giddy—Phil said he was giddy. Let him be wasteful and frivolous if he wants to be! What is it to you? He gets you out of Clippersville, and away from these gossiping old busybodies!"

The river of words dazed and terrified Gail. This could not be delicate, ethereal Ariel, pouring out this coarse and dangerous philosophy of life or of death! Ariel, summarizing Van Murchison's character in these biting words, calling him a "kid"! Ariel, whom they had all thought young, innocent, protected, confessing her determination to grab the first man she could, and escape—escape from Clippersville and Papa's portrait in the library, and the old Dickens and Thackeray sets, and the kitchen with its stained high old walls frowning down on the thinning ranks of the Lawrence spoons and silver forks!

Most terrible of all to Gail was her little sister's easy air of conspiracy, her casual quick assumption that they were both in the same boat. Gail was frantic with alarm. If she told Philip there would be domestic pandemonium, and if she did not, she herself must assume a most appalling responsibility.

Perhaps if she could get Ariel to promise—to swear . . .

Ariel was a minor after all. One could use that.

In the end there were no reproaches, no threats. She slid to her knees beside Ariel's bed, and locked Ariel's hand in her own and, after a long and solemn talk, they promised each other that there should be no more deceiving, no more clandestine parties, everything open and above board, between the two of them at least.

Being but seventeen and twenty-three, and Lawrences at that, they fell to crying and then to laughing, Ariel ending as usual with a complete upset. She was sick, and Gail, long familiar with the experience, was flying about making her comfortable when Edith came sympathetically upon the scene.

"Too much good time yesterday!" Edith said wisely, running to the linen closet, the kitchen, bringing the last of the ice upstairs, bathing the hot, delicate forehead under the wet silky hair.

Phil arrived just as the streaks of red sunset were fading from the old mustard-and-green brocade wallpaper of Ariel's room, and Sam came in, and they all sat about her, adoring her; Gail posted close beside her, holding the limp, exquisite little hand.

The dusk found them so, the square, resolute Lawrence faces fading from their clear pallor to grayness and into shadow, the light dying away on their bushy, tawny heads.

"How do you feel now, darling?"

"Oh, perfectly grand! But I think I'll stay here and be quiet."

"I should think you would!" Gail said, her whole heart melting in adoration of this frail, unwise, reckless little being, whose acts so often mirrored Gail's own unthinking words.

"Did you telephone that—Jack boy?" Ariel asked indifferently.

"Edith did. And he said he'd come next Sunday."

Silence. Phil was musing with a drawn forehead and bitten lip; Sam was half asleep; Edith sat dreaming, her blue eyes fixed on space, and Gail occasionally patted Ariel's limp little hand.

She felt oddly old, exhausted with emotion, tired from the confused impressions of these last brilliant, novel days, weak from the reaction from Ariel's revelations—yet she was strangely, deeply happy, too. Somehow, in the confession of their mutual adventures, the acknowledgment of their mutual despairs, desires, and dreams, she seemed to have come very close to Ariel to-day. The sense of her responsibility as Ariel's senior, of her big-sistership, was solemn upon her. She loved its weight.

"Not one of them—Edith, Gail, Ariel, Sam—is really self-supporting," thought Phil. "And Cass sends

Lily nothing; she doesn't even know where he is! Lily and the three kids—Wuffy and Miles and Daniel. If she came here—if we were married—that'd mean there were nine of us here, eating three meals a day. Twenty-seven meals a day—*God!* Gail might raise the roof, too. She might get Edith and Ariel to fight. But what could they do?

"If I get raised to forty a week . . . Nope. It couldn't be done!"

Ariel was not thinking. But her mind was washing idly about among the memories of the last twenty-four hours, and Buddy Raisch and his nerve, and that horrid, hard kiss that had been plastered against her delicate mouth when she had gotten out of the car at the Fairmont in the drifting, silent fogs of one o'clock this morning. She determined to have nothing more to do with him, roadster or no roadster. But she could not go on living in Clippersville. She was going to fail in her midsummer examinations at school, that was positive. She had borrowed more than twenty dollars from Dorothy, at different times, in small sums. She hated this jay town and these jay people and this old house with a bitter hatred. There must be a way out!

Edith told herself complacently that all this was very nice. Here was Phil home at a time when he might have been with Lily Cass, which proved that his affair with her was *over*. Gail was getting on splendidly with her new and wealthy friends, and would undoubtedly marry Van Murchison. Ariel had had a lovely little-girl time with Dorothy. Everything was going beautifully.

Sam's thoughts roved drowsily about the kid who had been with the little Wilcox girl at the movie last night. Gee, she had been a little peach. Gee, Sam wished he could buy a thin green jersey sweater with short sleeves. Gee, what a pippin of a girl to take riding, if one had a green sweater, new cords, and some sort of a car. Sam acquired a car, sitting here in the dusk of Ariel's room in the dreaming hour before Sunday night supper, and assumed the green sweater and the cords. He took Jean Wilcox and Lorette Booker driving.

"Ariel is smart about boys," Gail was thinking. Her cheek flushed as she remembered what Ariel had said. Gail herself had vaguely observed some lack—some essential thing missing in her friendship with Van. But it had been left for Ariel to put it into merciless words.

"What does it matter what Van Murchison wants?" Ariel had demanded in her wise young scorn. "He never says a sensible word or does a sensible thing. What do you care? You play his game! You don't want to change him; you want to marry him!"

Pondering, Ariel's cool little boneless hand in hers, Gail recalled this uncomfortably. Was it true? Well, no, not entirely. There was some truth in it, of course. But if Van Murchison happened to be a light-hearted, unthinking, fun-loving boy, young for his years, and if Gail Lawrence was developed beyond hers, matured by responsibility and experience, that did not mean that they could not fall in love with each other. How could she demand more of him than he naturally gave? What attitude on her part would create in him a soberer, a more dependable mood, on which a woman might base real hopes and plans?

CHAPTER XI

THINKING these thoughts, she did not feel quite the usual thrill when he came into the library a day or two later and stood, as he often did, with an elbow on the high desk, watching her amusedly as she stamped and scribbled in the shabby old books.

"Have you a good reference book on the diseases of hawk parasites?" the ringing voice said joyfully when she was free. There was no change in Gail's manner as she touched his big brown hand, but deep underneath she was conscious of change in herself.

Ariel's words: "He never says a sensible word or does a sensible thing. What do you care?" rang in her mind. She turned them upon Van like a searchlight.

"You don't want to change him; you want to marry him!" Ariel had said, with piercing wiseness. Watching him to-day, even while she joked and laughed with him, Gail told herself that she must change him indeed before there would be any thought of marriage.

This man was far from thoughts of marriage. By what twist, she wondered, did a girl bring her man from such irresponsible gaiety as this to the definiteness of an engagement?

An engagement began to seem to her an achievement, something quite extraordinary—a triumph. What a thing a girl accomplished when she could simply, complacently tell her friends that she and Tom So-and-so were going to be married!

Van wanted Gail to lunch with him to-day, and she reached for the telephone extension and told Edith that she would not come home as usual. It meant a pang to Edith, but it could not be helped.

But immediately after this Van suddenly turned scowling and gloomy and said that, no, hang it, he could not lunch with her after all. Gail took this gallantly, laughing reproachfully, but with a heightened color.

"I'll tell you," said Van, with his characteristic chuckle. "I promised a man at Beresford that I'd go up and look at a puppy!"

Gail did not know quite what to say, feeling as she did a little dashed and perplexed by the sudden change of plan.

"What sort of a puppy?" she asked, feigning interest.

"Anyway, there's no place to eat in this town!" he said, irresolutely.

"There's the market. Crabs and oysters—I like to lunch there," she suggested.

"But, dash it! I ought to see this feller in Beresford."

And he began to tell her of some nonsense he and Jim Speedwell had perpetrated last night. Gail tried to feel fondly indulgent; he was only a boy, after all. But she had a sense of futility; there seemed no way of catching the slippery substance of him in her fingers.

Something she said made him laugh violently, all the more deeply because the great "Silence" signs imposed self-control.

"I'm sorry about lunch to-day," he said gloomily, after the laugh.

"Oh, that's all right!"

"Say, let's go over and have lunch at Santa Cruz some Sunday, and swim? Can you swim?"

"I love it. Yes, we all swim." Mention of Santa Cruz reminded her of Mockerson's, and she wondered what Van would do if she told him her anxieties about Ariel. Would it develop anything new in him, responsibility, gravity? She could not do it now, but she liked to think about it.

He was gone. His motor's powerful engine roared in the hot midday that simmered outside the library; shot away under the trees that lined the sleepy street. He was hunting amusement somewhere; that was all he wanted. Van was like a child looking for someone with whom to play.

Well, what of it? she asked herself fiercely. That was not a fault. If a certain happiness, a certain frivolity of nature, was the worst failing a woman could find in her man, she was a fortunate woman.

Her thoughts were following him into the sunshiny June day. What fun to be Mrs. Murchison, white and cool and at leisure, there on the tilted leather seat beside him, and to inspect the puppy, too, and then go and have lunch at the Country Club, and watch tennis, or perhaps play golf.

Anyway—anyway, she reflected, walking home to lunch, she was a good deal nearer to that envied position than any other girl in Clippersville! She had proved herself on that grilling week-end visit to Los Gatos quite the match of the women of Van's set; she had won them, in spite of themselves.

Edith was in the kitchen, ecstatic over Gail's unexpected appearance and the addition of strawberries to her humble little meal. As they had lunched together hundreds of times before, they lunched to-day, in the shady, shabby place, each girl filling her own plate with whatever she fancied that was available, and both chattering eagerly over the meal.

"He asked me, the poor idiot, and then remembered instantly that he had an engagement!"

"Oh, the poor saphead!" Edith commented.

"Business."

"Well, that has to come first, Gail."

"I know!"

"I love him for his idiocies," Edith mused.

"I don't see," Gail began, after thought—"I don't see how a boy raised as he has been could very well be different. He's very generous."

"And so much fun!" Edith supplemented. "Why should he gloom and worry about the troubles of the world?" she demanded roundly.

"Exactly." Gail laughed, and added with the type of quick answering that her friendship with him had developed in her, "And I must say I think he has grasped that theory pretty thoroughly!"

They laughed together, gathering the dishes, cups, spoons into the dishpan, brushing crumbs, drawing shades.

"Did you make any date with him, Gail?"

"Nothing definite."

She suspected that he did not like to have definite dates. He liked to be free, so that if some prospect of better amusement appeared he might abandon previous plans.

But nothing could be more satisfying outwardly than his pursuit of her, and Gail had to be content with that for awhile. Van made no secret of his liking for her company, his delight in her enthusiasms and opinions, his admiration for the quick Lawrence wit that kept him on tiptoe. After an hour or two with him Gail sometimes was conscious of an emptiness, a certain reactive flatness. But she diagnosed this as a natural longing to see him again.

There were pinpricks everywhere; she bore them, ignored them, let them sweep by in the full flood of the most exciting experience her quiet life had ever brought her. Sisters, brothers, the kitchen at home, her work at the library—all had second place now.

In a half-hearted, highly unsatisfactory sort of way Mrs. Chipp had asked Gail to Far Niente again, and this time everything had gone gloriously—breathlessly. There had been charades built on the Lawrence formula, there had been an hysterical game of Sardines that left even the grown-ups spent and agonized with laughter; some of these demigods had gone so far as to remember Van's little friend from the library in Clippersville, and had been gracious to her.

Lenore Phipps had a birthday party with a hotel dinner and a dance in San Francisco in the first week of August, and Gail, reckless now, rather than ask his permission for the holiday, informed Francis Wilcox that she would be absent from the library the following day. The dance had been wonderful, and the foggy cool city delicious after the baking inland heat of Clippersville, and the whole experience filled with wild laughter and without a cloud.

Best of all had been the morning after the dance, when, waking in the big hotel on the hilltop, Gail had breakfasted in pajamas—the silk pajamas Edith had won when she won the Hope Chest at the Catholic

Fair last year—breakfasted in happy leisure, with the smoking, gossiping other girls, looking out across the gray summer bay, at the white wakes of the ferry boats, yawning, laughing, remembering all last night's fun, detail by detail.

After breakfast the party had split and scattered, Gail going off with Van in the roadster.

They had gone to the Cliff House and apostrophized the seals that were barking harshly on the rocks behind the drifts of fog; they had had tin-types taken on the board walk, and had tried all the swings and chutes. They had come downtown again and lunched on a roof above old Chinatown; hearing the cars honking in the streets below and the fishmen crying their wares, and watching the traffic on the bay, the fleet coming in, heavy with its catch, the windows of the prison island flashing in early afternoon sun, and the splendid *Aloha* making her majestic way seaward, past the forts and the clustered rich green trees on the cliffs at the Golden Gate. The fog was all gone now, and Chinatown's streets were hot and still as they had cruised through them in a giddy shopping tour at three o'clock.

Peering into the crowded, narrow shop windows, they had discovered dragons and strange gods, seahorses and starfish pickled in medicinal brines, oysters dried in flat circular cakes and strung on brown grasses. They had stopped at the markets, where rabbits had hopped heavily over sawdusty floors and long ropes of the tentacled octopus had dangled before the eyes of the trousered, slant-eyed housewives. They had bought ginger and li-chee nuts, had lingered long at the theater doorway, studying the cheap little photographs, bursting into fresh laughter as they pretended to translate the hieroglyphics to one another.

An idiot—yes, but Van was a most lovable idiot, the ideal idiot with whom to spend a silly day like this, when one's senses were still dreamy and dulled with the excitement of a gala night, and when one had him to oneself—not showing off, not given any chance to be drawn away, innocently to hurt one's feelings. This day in Chinatown was one to be marked with a white stone for Gail.

At four they had known they must start for home. It would take almost two hours to drive to Clippersville; Gail had not dared prolong the fun too far. Van had landed her safely at her own gate at six o'clock, and she had gone into the dim old brooding house, that was close and dark to-night, with a sudden realization of the limitations of the place—the stupidness of home.

"I've had the best time I ever had in my life!" she could tell them over and over again, exhausted by sheer felicity. She told them the jokes, the situations, the events, in an inconsequential jumble. Edith had listened eagerly, sympathetically; Phil was not at home. Ariel had listened too, but with a difference.

"Ariel had an experience last night. She went out for a casual drive with the Camps after the movie," Edith had said, "and they broke a spring, and it was nearly midnight when she got in! Phil and I were terribly frightened."

Gail's eyes and Ariel's had flashed together. But even when they were alone Ariel had not been communicative.

"You run your affairs and let me run mine!" she had said, not rudely, very simply.

"But it wasn't a broken spring, Ariel?"

"I say it was."

Gail had been too anxious to get back to her own dreams and memories to worry, even about Ariel.

The day had had its marvelous moment. It had come at four o'clock, when she and Van, laughing over the purchase of dragons, bowls, candlesticks, and charms in the sandal-scented, opium-scented interior of a dark little Chinatown shop, had been reluctantly forced to a consideration of the flying time.

"Yep, that's so, we can't stay in town—we ain't married yet!" Van had said, with his wild laugh.

It wasn't much. But it was enough for her to remember happily now; it showed that he *did* think of it, that it was in his mind.

"We ain't married yet!" It would have been a little better if he had not put it in the vernacular. Still . . . it was sweet.

As Mrs. Van Murchison she could do everything in the world for Ariel, for them all. And she would.

"Welcome visitors to Clippersville are Mr. and Mrs. Paul Vance Murchison, the latter having been Miss Abigail Lawrence of the well-known Clippersville family . . ."

She went to sleep dreaming of the newspapers of a few years hence. Her heart was very tender toward Van to-night. He had been a charming companion today, this big tweed-clad man with the well-filled wallet and the shining open car. Gail liked the memory of his smiling lean face grinning at her. His familiarity with the ways of the world pleased her: his ready tips, his manner with waiters, his knowedge of menus. She liked his clothes, his speech; she liked his references to places and things that belonged to a world of leisure and luxury that she did not know.

Almost every week-end was spent at the ranch in Los Gatos now, and between the Mondays and Fridays Gail lived in but a dreamy half-consciousness of what went on at home. Her thoughts were always of what she must wear next Saturday; her everyday appearance was newly important, too. For the women of Van's set had taken her up, and when the Chipps were back at home, as they frequently were in midweek, Mary Spence or Lucia would come to Clippersville to stay with Lenore, and they would all straggle into the library during the dull forenoons to report their shopping expeditions, or try to coax Gail to come off with them to a Country Club lunch.

She had always taken her vacation in August, usually spending it restfully at home, doing the mending, darning, straightening of books, changing of domestic arrangements for which the year never left time. But this year she took it in seven successive Saturdays and Sundays, an arrangement highly displeasing to Mr. Wilcox, over whose head she calmly carried her request to Arthur Chipp himself.

Life, at this accelerated pace, fairly burned her up. The new pleasures enchanted her, but never satisfied, leaving her always straining for more; which indeed was the position of them all—Lenore, Mary, Van, Fred, to say nothing of their elders. They went everywhere, anywhere, they did anything and everything that might promise fun. Gail was surprised to discover what they thought fun, and what bored them. Breakfast on the Maccleishes' yacht, for example; life on the Maccleishes' yacht had nothing to do with sailing or the water. The yacht might as well have been moored ten feet underground in a coal mine, for all its gay party ever saw of the sea. Yet there was something distinguished about being asked to spend a week-end on a real yacht!

Everyone slept late on the *Lazy Lady,* and breakfasted under an awning, in pajamas, at about eleven. There were cocktails and highballs mixed in with the coffee and eggs at breakfast, and much smoking went on all the time. Then they all played bridge—even Gail, for her home game was rapidly developing under the sting of losing a quarter-cent a point. She bet so much, and Van carried the remaining four and a half cents. Gail hated to have him lose money on her game, but he would have it that way.

A sandwich lunch was served in the cabin, with many more drinks, and after that everyone disappeared for a siesta. On her first trip Gail had thought that this would be a nice time to take a deck chair and enjoy the sense of being really at sea. But the deck chair was restricted and unsteady, the deck hot in afternoon sunshine, and the deck hands, murmuring as they moved chairs and rolled awnings, were a continual distraction.

More than that, the other girls spent these hours in real rest, dressing their hair, creaming their faces, exchanging endless gossip and idle talk, lying flat on their bunks, with their clothing reduced to a silky minimum, and Gail enjoyed that, too. So she came to do as the others did, glancing only occasionally, abstractedly, at the sea, sandwiching her half-guilty ejaculations as to its beauty and freshness in among the constant flying jokes and nonsense that were a part of this way of living. Gail's feeling that she owed a duty to the sea became one of their great jokes.

After dinner, beautifully frocked and groomed, they settled down eagerly, like a flock of vultures, to the green-topped tables again.

But visiting on the Maccleishes' yacht was not merely a matter of the hours one spent on it, of course. The glory spread far ahead of it, and far behind it. Gail saw her name in the Clippersville *Challenge* more than once during this amazing summer, listed among the guests at affairs whose distinction a few months back was beyond her wildest dreams.

She had a feverish feeling sometimes of having lost Edith, lost Phil and Sam and Ariel, lost touch with her work at the library and her duties at home—one could not live two lives, after all, and Van's very exactions were a delight, an answer to her wild young ardent prayers of last spring. Nothing mattered but that she should please him, should keep close to him. She grew wittier, quicker, gayer as the weeks went by; their talk together was merely a quick cross-fire of repartee.

Fun at the time. But it left her little to remember.

One night in late August she and Van walked home from a movie in Clippersville. It was a good movie, and the house had been crowded. The night was insufferably hot, and the audience was glad enough to straggle out into the black darkness of the Calle, where the air was some degrees cooler.

"Whew! That was frightful," Gail breathed, turning her bared head up to the stars, shaking back her tawny mane. Her arms were bare, her throat bare, her thin dress was brief, and still she felt smothered.

"This is a snorter!" Van commented. "Los Gatos to-morrow, hey? And into the pool."

The moon had not yet risen, but there was an odd light in the world, at nine o'clock; whitewashed surfaces and the adobe walls of the oldest buildings wore an odd pale glimmer of white. The upper branches of the great trees over the Calle rustled wearily in a hot wind.

"Maybe we'll go over to the beach Sunday," Van said.

"I wish we were there now!"

"Take you in a minute!" he offered eagerly. The girl laughed.

"A hundred miles," she said drily. "And we'd get so hot going over, and be so tired coming back, that we wouldn't gain much."

"Ice cream at Dobbins'?" he suggested.

"Kind of mussy." But she turned toward the drug store none the less; the opportunity to be seen by all the town, having soda at Dobbins' with Van Murchison, must not be overlooked.

They sat at the counter and had grape juice on chopped ice, and more grape juice on chopped ice. The bright lights shone down on them mercilessly; Sticky Dobbins and Al and the new boy at the counter perspired visibly as they raced to and fro.

Gail saw herself, bareheaded, in the big mirror, between the bright advertisements, and thought that she looked pale, and that her hair was flat. All Clippersville came in and out of Dobbins' on a hot summer evening, and she kept wheeling about on her high stool to greet library acquaintances and neighbors and friends.

"How-do, Miss Lawrence." "Hello, Gail." "How-do, Gail." "Good-evening, Miss Lawrence!"

They all saw that she was with Van Murchison.

"Good-evening, Grace. Don't you want to get up here next to us?"

"Oh, my goodness, no! I've come for Grandpa's medicine. He's been awfully bad . . ."

Girls bought rouge and powder at the drug counters; young men dawdled over cigarettes. The chocolate fountain, the malted milk churn were never still.

"Isn't it 'most too hot to *live?*"

"Well, isn't it?"

Ariel came in and put her slim arms about Gail from behind and kissed the bright wave of tawny hair over Gail's ear. She was with the regular high-school group, girls in white middy blouses with long scarlet ties, pimpled grinning boys in sleeveless jersey sweaters.

"Take our places," Gail said, getting down. "We're done!"

She walked along beside Van silently in the street. The man kept up his regular stream of chatter for a minute; somehow it jarred to-night. Gail broke across it suddenly.

"The reason I wanted to come away was—my brother Phil was in Dobbins', there."

"Your brother Phil was!"

"Yes. 'Way over in the corner, in one of the twosomes."

"In one of the *what?*"

"The twosomes. That's what they call those little alcoves. Phil was there."

"Why didn't we yell at him?" Van asked simply.

She had to have sympathy; she had to test him. With a sudden letting down of the bars she said, "Because his girl was with him."

"And don't you like her?" Van demanded, with his delighted air of discovering something amusing.

"I despise her!" Gail answered somberly.

"Not really!" he exclaimed ecstatically. "What? Phil's girl?"

"She's not a girl, really, and it's very serious," Gail said, determined to sober him. "She's a divorced woman, and she has three little boys about three and two and one——"

"Oh, I love it!" Van said with relish. "Phil! Old sober-sides! I adore it! I'm crazy about it!"

"Van, how can you say so!" Gail reproached him, hurt. "She's a terrible girl; she comes from Thomas Street Hill; she was one of the Wibsers."

"Oh, I think it's perfectly grand!" Van said, with his raw, joyous laugh. "Think of the trouble and expense saved—his family all ready-made!"

"Well, he won't marry her," Gail said stubbornly. Walking along in the dark she felt angry and resentful.

"Oh, why not? She sounds to me like a lot of fun!" Van argued in his gayest tones.

"It doesn't matter what she sounds like," Gail assured him primly and coldly, "for I don't think Phil any more means to marry her than you do!"

"She sounds just my very ideal," Van chuckled.

"No, honestly, Van," Gail persisted, not to be won, "it would be absolutely terrible for us all to have Phil marry Lily Cass!"

"Oh, you're mad—I've actually got you mad!" Van exulted, catching a glimpse of her face beneath a street light.

"You have *not* got me mad!" she said childishly.

" 'Gail's mad!' " he chanted, " 'and I'm glad, and I know how to please her——' "

But suddenly perceiving that she was not amused, and that a genuine mood of anger and disappointment was keeping her silent, he changed his tone and said rallyingly, lightly:

"Why, what do you care who your brother marries! *You* don't have to marry her! It's his funeral."

"I suppose so," Gail conceded after a moment, wearily.

"Want to jump into the car and rush off somewhere and get cool?"

"It would take too long, and I'm too tired, and I promised Edith to be home early. She gets nervous."

The car was parked a hundred feet from the Lawrence gate. Gail went to the fence that had once been their meadow fence, and leaned on the bars and stared into the night that was now lighted by the moon.

Beyond the fence the land fell away toward the marshes. It was dotted with great oaks whose shadows were black lace in the hot moonlight. Off toward the east, beyond the marsh, the hills rose again, and the bare brown summer mountains swam in moonlight mist.

The air was sweet with dust, tarweed, and fruity smells; the apples and peaches were ripe now, the prunes and figs almost ripe. Grape leaves hanging heavy and thick on the Lawrences' arbor vines over the hard tight little green grapes sent their own strange, winy smell into the night.

"Phil's marrying would simply wreck our home," Gail said, reverting to the topic deliberately, desperately.

"Oh, forget it! He won't marry her," Van assured her easily.

"I think," she began, a little thickly—"I think what worries me is Ariel. She's so proud, she's so sensitive——"

"Shucks! She isn't any prouder or more sensitive than you are!" Van said unsympathetically. He hated to be serious, Gail knew. He was hating it now.

"I've always felt responsible for—the children," she said heavily, feeling the tone of the conversation twist away from her, take on meanings she had not meant to express.

"My dear, this is interesting! I didn't know you had children!"

She laughed; she could not refuse him the laugh. But immediately she reverted to her serious mood and said, "Ariel is giving me a good deal of anxiety. She—Phil doesn't know this, nobody does——"

"Aw, come on! Let's beat it off somewhere and get cool! I'll get Lenore to go—she'll still be at the movie—if you want someone else along!" Van said in the silence, suddenly persuasive.

"The thing about Ariel is," Gail pursued resolutely, "that she is running around with that Buddy Raisch crowd—of course they may be a perfectly decent crowd underneath——"

"Who is?" Van interrupted imperatively, quickly.

"Ariel. Nobody knows it. But she's gotten into a habit of——"

"Your sister?"

"Yes. Ariel."

"Why, she's nothing but a school child!" Van said, in distaste and displeasure.

"Well, she's not such a school child but what she lets Buddy Raisch take her out in his roadster——"

"Oh, I love it! I think it's priceless!" Van exclaimed, laughing, as Gail's troubled voice fell still.

"I don't know what to do about it," Gail began again. "I was wondering," she added timidly, "what you would think I ought to do, Van?"

He was interested now, but in an annoyed, reluctant sort of way. He said quickly:

"I? For heaven's sake, what should I know about it? It seems to me if she's such a fool she likes to run 'round with a bounder like that, why, let her do it!"

"But you don't understand, Van," Gail said patiently. "She's only seventeen—she won't be eighteen until next Christmas."

"That wasn't no hindrance to the late Miss Juliet Capulet!" Van reminded her joyously.

Gail laughed faintly, and was silent. They hung on the fence, staring off over the haycocks, dimly gold in moonlight, to the shimmer of the marshes and the rise of the mountains beyond. The whole world—meadows, oaks, marshes, mountains—was steeped in silver mist.

"I'll come for you early to-morrow," Van presently said. "How's nine o'clock? That gets us to the ranch at noon, easy."

The girl felt cold, unresponsive, heavy.

"I oughtn't to go at all to-morrow. Miss Foster, at the library, is away on her vacation, and the poor little Wilcox baby is terribly ill. They don't expect it to live. It only weighs five pounds, and it's two months old."

"Oh, Lord, are we back to the Wilcox baby? I never knew such an irresolute kid! Why doesn't he make up his mind, one way or the other?" Van demanded whimsically, cheerfully, not at all unsympathetically.

"It's a girl," Gail observed dispassionately.

"Ah, then that explains it!"

They were standing close together at the old fence rail; he might easily have put his arm about her. But he never attempted that sort of thing; Gail wondered sometimes if it were some queer lack in her that prevented him, or some missing quality in him.

Both, perhaps. The mental element in their relationship, the constant joking and laughter were a sort of safeguard. They were too critical, too witty, to descend contentedly to kisses and embraces in the sleepy darkness of the parked car, on some lonely summer road, as other men and girls did. Theirs was not that sort of relationship.

"Oh, by the way!" Van said to-night, in parting. "Mother'll be here to-morrow!"

"Your mother!"

"Yep. She arrives in the afternoon; someone's driving her up from Santa Barbara. She's coming out to read the Riot Act to me and to drag me home."

"Oh, really?" Her voice sounded flat and tame in the darkness.

"Well, sooner or later, I suppose. She wrote me something about coaching—digging up in physics and psychology—so I can take the exams in September. I don't know what it's all about, but it may save me redoubling on my sophomore year. I don't know."

Gail, going into the house, determined that she would not go down to Los Gatos at all to-morrow, and felt a great relief in the thought. The week-end of Mrs. Murchison's arrival would be a very good week-end upon which to absent herself; it would be more dignified, it would show a certain niceness. Then, if they wanted her, they could make a special overture next week.

This week-end she would remain at home and do her duty nobly by the library and Francis Wilcox, and let him stay, on Sunday, with that pale little fretful baby who was so obviously destined to wring her parents' hearts with one more anguish. And she would amuse the family, go to church with Edith, let Ariel have her friends in for Sunday supper, perhaps lure even Phil back into the home circle.

Edith, discovered reading *Erewhon,* highly disapproved this idea.

"Why, you're crazy!" she said.

"Oh, I don't know," Gail answered drearily, undressing by sections in Edith's room. "It's always the same thing. It doesn't—*get* you anywhere!"

"You have a lot of fun!" Edith said staunchly.

Gail wandered away to her own room, returned in pajamas, brushing her thick mop of tawny-gold hair.

"Phil was at Dobbins' to-night," she said suddenly, "with Lily."

Edith's eyes flashed up from the book; she opened her lips to speak, made no sound. They stared at each other.

"He wasn't!" Edith whispered after awhile.

"He was."

"At Dobbins'!"

"In one of the twosomes—the alcoves."

"Oh, Gail!" Edith wailed.

"I know. It's awful."

"He's crazy," the younger sister said darkly. They brooded upon it a moment in silence. Then Edith, brightening, added suddenly, "Gail, while you were out I thought of why Van's mother is coming to California! She's coming to see you, you idiot! It's as plain as anything could be."

Gail smiled, without answering. A few weeks ago she would have jumped at this conclusion; she wished she might do so now. But she felt tired and blue to-night; discouraged about Phil, about Ariel, about her own hopes and plans concerning Van. A sense of futility, of helplessness, was heavy upon her as she went slowly downstairs and slowly moved about the kitchen, pressing her white linen, freshening her printed chiffon.

Ariel came in, exquisite in paleness and dishevelment. She sat down laughing at the end of the table where Gail was working.

"My dear, feel my hand! I'm actually co-o-old! Can you believe it, a night like this? Van Murchison was waiting for his sister—for Mrs. Phipps, you know—outside Dobbins' when I came out. So I thought that the least I could do was stop and tell him that she'd gone home with the Hunters. So then we got sort of laughing, and he said he'd bring me home, and when we were in the car I said I wished we knew of a cool place nearer than Nome, Alaska, and he said any place was cool if you went seventy an hour. . . .

"We laughed and screamed at each other all the way!" she said, finishing the story.

Gail knew exactly how; she could hear the wild laugh.

"Oh, Ariel, what fun!" she said warmly.

"I'm crazy about him," said Ariel. "I think he's darling!"

"Isn't he nice, when you know him?"

"Oh, he's darling! His mother's coming to-morrow."

"Yes, I know."

"D'you s'pose she's coming to see you, Gail?"

"I don't know. Ede thought she might."

"Oh, Ede!" Ariel said with scorn. "At that, she might," she added thoughtfully.

"Probably not," Gail decided heroically.

Ariel was still for perhaps a whole minute, her eyes fixed on space. Then she said suddenly, "Oh, Gail, I wish——" She stopped as suddenly.

"Yes, I know. So do I!" Gail said, turning scarlet and laughing.

"Do you think——" Ariel began again, and again stopped short.

"I don't know."

"He certainly——" said the little sister. "He certainly pays you—well, attentions," she persisted awkwardly, "that would—well, would mean that any other boy was dotty about you if he did it!"

Gail, red-cheeked, her iron arrested, watched her expectantly, perfectly comprehending.

"But you—you ought to know——" Ariel said.

"I don't," Gail answered truthfully, in a troubled tone.

"It's funny, isn't it?" Ariel presently asked simply.

"It's awfully funny," Gail agreed.

Ariel said nothing more, presently drifting from the kitchen. Gail hung her frock and her scarf carefully on a hanger, and went into the library to run along the familiar lines of books: Stevenson, Dickens, Scott, Fielding, Lever, De Maupassant. She took *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* and *The Lost Playmate* and *The Doll's House,* and went slowly upstairs.

The old house was quiet, airy on the close August night. Dingy white window curtains blew softly back and forth across the window sills in the upper hall. Ariel's light was out; Gail peeped in at her, heavily asleep. Edith was still reading. It was somehow reassuring to see the penciling of light under Phil's door; he was reading, too, and Sam's transom showed a dull glow. Her younger brother looked up beaming from *You Can't Win* when she glanced in to say good-night.

"Say, d'you know any other books like this, Sis? It's a pip."

"Well, I'm not sure; can't think of one this minute. I'll look in the library."

"It's lots cooler now," Sam said, as his window curtain suddenly stood out straight like a flag.

"I may be engaged to be married this time tomorrow night," she thought, when she was in bed, reading. "There's a moment when one isn't, and then suddenly—one is. That's all there is to it. Girls do get engaged; almost every girl gets engaged."

She thought of the Fosters and the Delahantys. Three good, busy, homely unmarried sisters in each family. Two in the post office, two teaching school, one in the library, one a stenographer. Gail's heart failed her.

Resolutely, she resumed her reading. The story of an English father, and of a little daughter who died. England. Meadows fenced with hedges, and cathedral spires over oaks. Homing crows, and thatched roofs.

Oh, it would be fun to travel, to go to England! To see a yellow fog closing in over the Thames Embankment, to pay for purchases in crowns and shillings, to stand, in a brown belted coat, in big railway stations, identifying trunks. . . .

Sudden rage and resentment shook her. It was not fair that some girls should travel, go places, do fascinating things, and that other girls should drudge away at the library, year after year, while hope died and youth faded and enthusiasms were spent—like the

Fosters' and the Delahantys' enthusiasms—upon church fairs and preserving fruit.

And it was not fair that her particular prospects, Gail Lawrence's particular prospects, should depend upon a casual, scatterbrained person like Van. She could perceive no other way of escape for herself than marrying Van, and while he was the most delightful, amusing, good-hearted creature in the world, he was not the sort of person upon whom one's plans should depend. The age-old humiliation of the waiting woman smote her, and her cheeks reddened.

"If a girl's life really does depend on the chance of a man's asking her to marry him," she reflected, "then what nonsense all this talk is about 'character being fate' and 'the fault, dear Brutus, not being in our stars but in ourselves'!

"It's not right," Gail said solemnly to the shabby old silent room, through whose windows the hot smell of pear trees and burned grass was penetrating from the dark night outside. "There's nothing in character, if it only gets you what the Fosters and the Delahantys have got!

"I'm not sure," she decided darkly, "but what Ariel's in the right! I'll bet she gets to London before I do!"

CHAPTER XII

THE next day she rose unrefreshed and dissatisfied, and dragged heavily through her preparations to go to Los Gatos, as if the prospect were anything but inviting.

It would have filled her with ecstasy a year ago; she felt dull and doubtful about it now.

"I look horrible!" she said to Ariel, who was idling about the house in a Saturday morning state of nothing to do.

"You look lovely!"

"I think something's coming on my chin."

"Oh, nonsense, Gail, you look darling!"

And Ariel, all helpful sympathy, came out to the gate when Van parked there, honking wildly, at ten o'clock.

"Here," he said, leaping out, "I'll take that!" He stowed Gail's suitcase in the rumble. The three stood smiling and gossiping in the soft foggy morning.

Ariel had on an old pink linen dress, a dress that had been washed to fadedness, limpness, tightness. She looked like a child in it. Her flyaway pale gold hair was drifting in its usual shining fringes against her pink cheeks; she was the only Lawrence with high color, or with finely cut brows. She sparkled in the dull morning like something jeweled.

"I wish I were going with you!" she said frankly.

"Well, why don't you come!" Van exclaimed, suddenly fired.

"For one thing, Mister, I'm not axed!" Ariel reminded him, with the deep, boyish note of laughter that was in such odd contrast to her ethereal beauty.

"Oh, nonsense; they like whomever I bring!" Van said.

Gail's laugh was a trifle constrained; she wondered if Ariel was thinking, as she was, that her own first invitation to Far Niente had been slightly irregular.

She had told Ariel a hundred times that she, Gail, would love to take her some week-end to Los Gatos, and introduce the younger sister to all its delights. And she had meant it.

Therefore Gail hated herself now for the unwillingness that rose like a tide in her heart; fear, reluctance, shame. It wouldn't do—it simply wouldn't do to bring this unasked, too young, too beautiful little sister; it would create awkwardnesses unthinkable; it would complicate an already complicated situation.

"Oh, no, I couldn't. I've got a date with the crowd to-night," Ariel protested, quickly and finally, "and I couldn't anyway, I'm not dressed! And I couldn't anyway."

For an instant the matter hung fire, and Gail did not know whether or not in that instant Ariel sent her a glance of wild hope. Immediately the younger girl settled the matter, and was running back into the house shouting, "Have a good time!"

Despite her sister's protests, Gail felt like a murderer as Van's car shot away across the long bare road, away from dusty, dull Clippersville into the beauty and shade and coolness of Far Niente. The thought of that quick, hopeful glance of Ariel's—that glance that might not ever even have been sent or been thought of—haunted her.

Not that Ariel could have come, no. Obviously that would have been a mistake.

But Gail kept wishing that she, Gail, had urged it, had impulsively, ridiculously, pressed it. It would have made no difference in the outcome, for even little Ariel knew that she mustn't expect to go places just because Gail did. She wouldn't have come. She would know that they might snub her.

"Well, what if they did?" Gail's feverish, remorseful thoughts went on. "What if they did snub her? Am I so soft that I can't stand a little snubbing for my sister? I would have stood by her; I know how to manage them now!

"And anyway, they mightn't have snubbed her. Ariel isn't as sensitive as Edith and I are. People don't snub her, somehow."

She felt sick about it. Great waves of homesickness swept over her; anger, resentment, love, despair shook her in turn.

Ariel ought to be having wonderful week-end invitations of her own. It ought not to be Gail's responsibility—the safety, the happiness of her little sister!

And yet the memory of the little flying pink figure and the shouted "Have a good time!" in Ariel's oddly deep voice would not let her be at peace. She was gnawed by hunger for Ariel, incessant and deep.

Van's mother proved to be a thin, dark, smart woman in a beautiful transparent gown of orange and black. She greeted her son with a fretful "Van, I suppose you know your father's furious at you, and making life simply wretched for me?" and gave to Gail only an abstracted frown.

"I think you were in school with my mother, Editha Petrie, in San Francisco?" Gail said, trying to seem at ease.

"I was in school with nobody's mother, and I won't be incriminated, and I am praying the Lord to grant me a long and prosperous thirty-one!" Mrs. Murchison said, to the company at large rather than to Gail, and in exactly Van's airy, inconsequential manner.

"She'll never forgive you that as long as you live, Gail!" Van exclaimed in the laughter that followed. Gail laughed, too, but she felt hot and uncomfortable.

In all it was an uncomfortable visit; the least happy she had ever had at Far Niente, even including the first, with its nervousness and shyness. Mrs. Murchison's presence seemed to accentuate Gail's feeling of not belonging to the group. Mary Spence had gone to Canada, on her long trip back to Wellesley, Lucia Tevis was shortly to join her. A new girl was at the ranch, an intimate of Lenore Phipps; the two appeared to have much to say to each other confidentially. For the rest there were three men Gail had never seen before; they were absorbed in the topic of the golf tournament at Del Monte, and for a little while on Saturday afternoon Gail was excited by the possibility of their all going down to Monterey to try a day's preliminary playing.

But in the end it was decided that the three men and Van should leave before breakfast and go there alone.

"That is, I would," Van said, "if I didn't feel it would leave Gail in the lurch!"

"We'll take care of Gail," Mrs. Chipp said.

"We were going up to lunch with Ethel and play bridge," Mrs. Murchison reminded her in a light, droning voice not intended for Gail's ear.

"Oh, well, that's all right!" said Mrs. Chipp, who liked Gail, pleasantly. "We'll just leave her here to amuse herself, and the boys will be back for dinner, and we'll all go home Monday afternoon."

Gail had to protest; her library job would stand no more trifling. She must be back Sunday afternoon, positively.

There ensued one of the blank pauses that so upset their autocratic plans. Well, then . . . well, then . . .

Mason was going back, of course, with fruit and vegetables. For the second time Gail leaped at the opportunity to go home with Mason.

"But my dear, he's going frightfully early," said Mrs. Chipp. "He's going at a perfectly unearthly hour. Eight, I think. Because it gets so frightfully hot."

"Eight's nothing to me!" Gail said, laughing nervously. She wanted to go home! She wanted to put it out of these persons' power to hurt her any more. "Won't these golfers be breakfasting early?" she asked.

It was arranged. The bridge players plunged back gladly into the mysteries of vulnerability and redoubling. The young men played tennis, and Gail watched and laughed and applauded, with Lenore and Mab Whiting murmuring confidentially beside her, and with very deliberate carelessness not hearing her.

Later, going to the cabin to dress, she heard Mrs. Chipp good-naturedly reproaching somebody for something. The voices came from behind a screen of shrubs and tall flowers, where the hammocks were.

". . . it was dreadful. . . . I mean it was unmistakable. . . . I mean it was enough to make him furious," said Mrs. Chipp's amused, indifferent voice.

Another woman's voice spoke quickly in answer, laughingly and indifferently, too, but with more vigor. Mrs. Murchison's voice.

Gail could not hear the first dozen words. But the last trailed through her consciousness as she escaped, scarlet-cheeked, out of hearing.

". . . with a Clippersville girl!"

The tone, the emphasis of the voice, interpreted the whole to her perfectly. Van's father would be furious with him, going with a Clippersville girl. It served him perfectly right, wasting his time with a Clippersville girl. It did not matter whose feelings were hurt or were not hurt; it was only a Clippersville girl!

Her face blazed, her throat was thick and dry. She walked slowly up to the cabin, entered into its peace and shadiness quietly, and began her preparation for dinner in the brown-walled, chintz-curtained little room that was familiar now.

All the time her heart seethed like a boiling pot, and her thoughts went round and round dizzily. Her hands felt cold, and she was shaking.

"I'll be home this time to-morrow," said Gail, aloud, more than once.

What did it matter what that vulgar, smart, rouged, thin, dark woman said or thought! It did not affect Gail Lawrence; it did not affect Van Murchison.

It did affect Van, of course.

She got ready a cool bath, recklessly pouring in bath salts, dropping in scented flat French bath tablets, tearing the silver foil off a new cake of soap. Wandering about the room in a thin cotton kimono, she addressed herself, aloud.

"You poor fool! You thought you might be engaged to-night!

"Well—you may be.

"I'd like to be, just to get even with her! I'd like to be so stunning, so smart, so popular that she was wiped right out of sight . . .

"I hate her. . . . No, I don't suppose I hate her. . . . Yes, I do.

"I despise her! I'd like her to break her leg. I *would*. I wouldn't want her to get a cancer, exactly. But I'd like something to happen to her!"

The childishness of her own monologue made her begin suddenly to laugh, and she found tears in her eyes.

This wouldn't do. Gail seized the Lawrence panacea for all troubles, the nearest book. *Men Without Women.* Its appropriateness made her laugh shakily again. She got into the tub and lay with her loosened tawny mop resting against the porcelain curve at the foot, the book raised safely above the water.

But afterward her thoughts came back heavily to the memory of the insulting words, the insulting laugh, and she felt her face burn.

There was nothing to do but go through with the evening's program with what dignity she could muster; the boys seemed to her very noisy, very much absorbed in their own affairs, at dinner, and after dinner there was a half-hearted game of roulette, in which Lenore and Mab Whiting won everything, while Gail lost quarters and dimes to a painful degree.

It then appeared that the four boys were going over to Del Monte that night, so as to play the Pebble Beach course early in the morning. This did not upset Mab or Lenore in the least; they said they wanted to sleep late on the morrow and go up to a club luncheon anyway. Gail was careful not to let anyone suspect that it made any difference to her. But she felt hurt and sore. At half-past nine o'clock the roadster with the shouting boys in it departed on its seventy-mile run, and Gail found herself quietly in bed, reading again.

After awhile she let the book drop and lay thinking, staring into the dim cabin room with far-away, serious eyes, and with the bushy Lawrence eyebrows drawn together.

Outside, there was a chill mountain breeze moving over the drenched lawn and the flower beds; a wood cat prowled by with an unearthly yowl, and from a distant tree an owl sounded a woodeny, regular note. White shy moonlight poured in through the heavy rose vine that framed the window.

Gail felt very homesick. She wanted Sam and Ariel and Phil. Above all she wanted Edith, sensible, loving, loyal, thoughtful. She was torn with pangs of anxiety for them all.

"A Clippersville girl!" she said to herself in the night stillness. "Well, that's what I am! I don't know why that should make me mad."

Shamed, courageous thoughts possessed her; she plunged into them as into a river. Despite responsibility and precocious cares, she had done little philosophical thinking in her twenty-three years; she deliberately faced the situation now, faced her own soul.

The next morning she slipped away from Far Niente before any member of the family was astir. And with every mile of the home trip her heart grew lighter and her mind steadier and her quiet determination greater.

At two o'clock, cool and trim and sympathetic, she was back at her post in the library. The jaded man at the desk looked up incredulously.

"I thought you'd gone to Los Gatos, Miss Lawrence?"

"I came back. How's little Theodora, Mr. Wilcox?"

"Well, we had rather an anxious night with her."

"I'll take this on; you don't have to stay here," Gail told him decidedly. "You go home to Mrs. Wilcox!"

He was straining toward home already; every fiber of his being betrayed it.

"I take this very kind of you!" he said thickly, awkwardly.

"I hope you'll find her better—I know you will!" Gail encouraged him as he hurried away.

The long Sunday afternoon blazed over Clippersville; there were not many cars in town now. They had all gone off to find the coolness of woods and beaches. Women in clean fresh voiles sat on porch steps, or rocked in the shade of trees. There was a fire somewhere at four o'clock; the siren rose and fell in a heart-contracting scream, and bells and whistles smote the breathless heat mercilessly.

Inside the big dim library it was comparatively cool. Gail felt wearied, subdued, yet oddly content. This was duller than death, but it was peace. No one would hurt her here, humiliate her here; she belonged. She was not only in her proper place, but she was doing a fellow creature a service. No animal creeping back into the safety of its lair ever felt a deeper sense of gratitude.

And then—as always on library Sundays—Edith was there, slipping about the alcoves, coming up to the desk to beam, to whisper to her big sister.

"Ariel home?"

"No," Edith explained too cheerfully, too naturally; "Dot Camp telephoned to the Greeleys to say that they might not be back until after dinner."

"Telephoned to the Greeleys?"

"Yes. Lou Greeley came over about two o'clock."

"But why didn't Dot or Ariel telephone us?"

"Lou said she said she thought our line was out of order—it never answered."

The sisters exchanged a level, expressionless look.

"That's a new one," Gail presently murmured drily.

"Well, that's what I thought," Edith agreed reluctantly.

"Where do you s'pose they are?"

"Oh, just on one of those Sunday runs, when they eat greasy fried chicken off dirty board tables, and think they're having a wonderful time!" Edith said impatiently. Her face brightened; she held up a small book. "Ever read it, Gail?"

"Carlyle's *Revolution*. No, I never did."

"It must be good, Gail. It's in the little classics."

"I know. I've often thought it must be good. Come in here and help me straighten out all these returned books, Ede."

Edith entered the mahogany swinging gate with alacrity; her skillful, experienced fingers began to make short work of the confusion of the books behind the desk. At six Dora Foster came in, substituting for her sister, and Edith and Gail could walk home through the broiling late afternoon.

"Let's not have supper until seven. And let's get everything ready and then take baths and be beautiful!" Gail suggested. They fussed away in the shady kitchen together; Edith straining tea into tall glasses, Gail assembling the materials for one of her famous salads: chives, lettuce, enormous firm cold tomatoes, cucumbers sliced as fine as tissue paper.

"I could stuff some eggs, Gail. There's a little of that mayonnaise. And there's cream, but I'm afraid it's sour; it's just solid."

"Well, try it!"

"Oh, would you, Gail?"

"Try it. Sling in some mustard, and what's left of the mayonnaise, and some chili. . . . It can't kill anyone, even if they begin to puff at the mouth and turn yellow."

"I don't think I'll bother with biscuits; it's too hot."

"Oh, don't! Because I told Phil to stop at Barney's for English muffins."

With Sam's blundering help, they set the table out under the big oak in the side yard, close to the house, so that the smaller furnishings could be passed through the wide-open kitchen window.

Dick came in; Phil arrived with the muffins. They all sat about the table, while the last of the hot twilight died into a hot dusk, talking, murmuring, passing back and forth the old Brazilian silver salad bowl that Grandfather Lawrence had brought to Yerba Buena on that long-ago wedding journey.

The garden flowers lost their brilliance; red pencilings faded from the branched upper limbs of the great oak; sleepy birds called from the shrubbery.

Phil and Dick Stebbins monopolized the conversation for awhile; a man's conversation, centering about a great dam, its legal phases, its engineering problems.

But presently Gail was in the saddle, her elbows on the table, her fantastic combination of memory, imagination, and wit flashing like summer lightning wherever they could find an outlet. Edith laughed, Phil laughed, Dick laughed a deep, protecting, reluctant laugh at her audacities. She wore the purple swiss; from the square neckline her throat rose firm, cream-brown, like a column; her cleft chin and colorless square face were shadowed and softened in the dusk, but there was still enough light to show the vitality and shine in her mop of rich tawny hair.

"I feel as if we have you back, Gail!" Phil said, putting out his hand to lay it over hers on the table.

"Anybody object?" Dick had his old pipe in his palm.

"Some night some one of us will say, 'Yes, I do,' when you ask that, Dick," Gail said, "and you'll drop to the floor in a faint."

"I love the smell of your old pipe, Dick," Edith said, in an odd, dreamy tone. And something in Gail's heart turned over with amazement and shame and loyalty to Edith.

Edith! But it couldn't be possible that Edith felt anything for old Dick! Gail turned it over and over in her confused thoughts, while some of the opinions of the irrepressible Formaldehydes convulsed the family.

Edith! Gail's heart contracted with pity and an odd reluctance and pain. It was not only that Dick Stebbins was not the sort of person one thought of as a husband for one's sister; to Gail it was clear that Edith's first innocent romantic yearning, at twenty-one, had fastened itself on Dick simply because he was the nearest man. Edith had endowed Dick with the qualities her knight must have, regardless of what Dick actually was. That he would not play up to her artless dream was a foregone conclusion.

She had betrayed herself with that slow, fond, "I love the smell of your old pipe, Dick!" Gail wondered if her own quick rush of protecting nonsense had been swift enough to distract the boys' attention, and above all Dick's attention, from the significance of the tone.

As the conversation veered and shifted she looked at Dick with new eyes. He was a big young man; "muscley and sweaty," Ariel had once called him. He had a long hard throat, and a big hard jaw, and heavy hair which the same disrespectful critic had called "Swede brown." The Stebbinses did actually have Norwegian or Swedish blood.

The Lawrence girls had always liked Dick because of his passionate loyalty and devotion to Phil. But they found him rather slow going. He had sisters, but they were much older than he, and married, and Dick regarded girls as mysterious, incomprehensible. He had a slow, heavy way of analyzing their careless remarks, questioning them tirelessly as to their motives or ideas, and marveling at their strangeness, that sometimes made them impatient, and sometimes amused.

Anything but the ideal lover—and yet, if Edith liked him . . . ! And Gail began to spin a new romance, in which Edith tamed and groomed this clever big silent creature—and Ariel married Van, who had been so captivated by her yesterday morning—and Gail made a dashing match with a person yet unknown.

She sighed, with sheer relief and pleasure. She might grow to be an old maid and Edith another, but there were less pleasant lives than the one that included these Sunday evenings under the oak with twilight and laughter and the old silver salad bowl. Especially if Dick and Sam and Ariel married and Phil did not, so she and Edith would always have their big brother at home to protect them.

"Why the sigh?" Dick asked in his quickly concerned way. "Are you wishing you hadn't come home?"

"I was just thinking how grand it is!" Gail answered with unusual patience, crinkling her heavy brows into a smile.

The telephone in the lower hall, twenty feet away, rang suddenly, and Gail ran to it.

"It's Ariel, and I've got to talk to her!" she called back as she ran, for a growing vague anxiety about Ariel had been worrying her for some time. But it was not Ariel, and Gail came back to the group under the oak with a grave face.

"The Wilcox baby died about an hour ago," she said, sitting down next to Phil. Her voice was heavy; Phil put his arm about her shoulders; they were all serious for a few minutes.

"Oh, I feel so sorry for them!" Gail kept saying in distressed bursts.

"Gail, you gave him the baby's last hours anyway," Edith reminded her after a while.

"Yes, that's so. That's so. Oh, my God, how glad I am I came home!" Gail said, looking up at the mellow dark blue sky, from which the last tufts of lighted cloud had vanished, to the first timid stars.

"Let's walk up there, Edith, when we get the dishes done. We won't see anyone, but we can leave a message."

"I'll tell you," said Edith. "We'll take the white phlox."

"I thought you hated Frank Wilcox?" Phil said.

"Not that much," Gail admitted seriously.

Suddenly, incongruously, she felt happy; the sensation almost bewildered her. Happy and serene, and yet oddly excited in some happy, confident way, too.

She looked about her in the dusky moonlight. There was nothing here to excite one to happiness: sticky glasses and empty plates and molasses cookies, Phil, Dick, Edith, and Sam with their faces mere pallid disks in the gloom.

"You Lawrence girls are the darnedest; you always have something to give away," Dick said, and Gail glanced toward him, suddenly shaking with another pleasant, inexplicable thrill.

The moon had risen now, and the strengthening silver light was beginning to drip down through the branches of the great trees that roofed the dooryard. It lay in pools in the more open garden beyond, turning the shabby old bunches of pampas grass into fountains of mysterious beauty, spreading the grape-vine shadows like black lace on the crushed yellow grass. Crickets were chirping; the dew smelled sweetly, sharply, on the summer dust.

"Where is that naughty Ariel?" Edith had asked drowsily, affectionately, and Gail, listening to the strokes of the cuckoo clock in the hall, had answered more reassuringly than she felt, "Only nine, that's not late!" when suddenly there was a stranger in the garden.

A stranger. At the first glimpse of him Gail's heart stood still, and her mouth filled with water. Horror. Horror. They were all lost.

The moonlight touched the star on his breast. Dick was the first to speak, in a quick, authoritative voice.

"What is it, Officer?"

"There's been a bad accident up near the cement works. A little girl has been killed——" the man began.

Gail was beside him, fingers gripping his arm.

"My sister!"

"No, ma'am, it wasn't your sister. She was mixed up in it; I brought her over here to see your brother. She ain't hurt," he said, answering the wild question in Gail's eyes. "She's just run upstairs inside; I'm waiting for her. I seen you out here, so I came over."

"What happened, Officer?" Dick's voice asked. The others were stricken dumb.

The man turned toward him in the gloom.

"She was driving a car, sir, and another automobile hit her. She didn't have a license, and she's booked for that, and also on a charge of manslaughter. In the mix-up, a little girl in a third car was thrown out on her head and killed."

"She's here now? My sister, I mean?" Phil asked, in a dead, awful silence.

"Yes—she just now run in the house to find you."

"After her, Phil! She may kill herself!" Gail said sharply, in a whisper. Edith put her hands over her face for a moment, praying, before they all ran together toward the kitchen door.

CHAPTER XIII

IN THE icy grip of horror and fear they all ran together up the kitchen steps, across the dark porch. Eyes still dazzled by the shadows of the yard, they blinked bewilderedly at each other, faces white, and quick voices shaking. Ariel . . . Ariel in an accident . . . somebody killed . . . a policeman here.

They heard her calling as they ran. She was somewhere upstairs in the dark house, running herself, opening doors, searching for them. There was an angry, reproachful note in her hoarse young voice.

"Phil! Gail! Where are you, Gail!"

"We're coming, darling!"

Ariel opened the door of the inner passage as the others rushed in from the porch, and stood at bay, facing them. Her fair, disordered hair was uncovered, she was breathing quickly, staring, with her head dropped a little forward and her hostile bright eyes moving from one whitened face to another.

She spoke impatiently, a note of reproach and complaint in her voice.

"Where were you, Gail? I've been hunting—I've been all over everywhere!"

"You're hurt!" Gail whispered, beside her.

"No, I'm not hurt at all, and for heaven's sake don't make such a fuss!" Ariel said quickly, in her proud, bored voice.

"Oh, it's you, Fargo?" Dick said to the policeman. "I didn't recognize you out there. Been an accident, eh?"

"Hello, Mr. Stebbins," the policeman said with a sort of deliberate solemnity. "Yes, sir. There's been a bad smash. Miss Lawrence here had a—a bad smash. Lucky me and McCann happened to be close by."

"And someone was—hurt?" Phil asked in a dead voice.

"There was a little girl killed, Mr. Lawrence. They took her to the hospital, but later we heard she——" The officer coughed respectfully. "She passed out on the way," he finished simply.

Words had lost all meaning for Gail. The shabby old kitchen was full of terrifying forces: black shadows, fear, all the terror of the trap. She wet her dry lips, tried to think. A way out—there must be a way out! Her arms were about her sister now; Ariel, without exactly repulsing the touch, still seemed to be holding herself aloof.

"Who's on the desk to-night?" Dick asked the officer in an undertone. "Walsh?"

"Well, yes, it's Sergeant Walsh to-night," Fargo answered in a respectful, regretful sort of tone. "Miss Lawrence," he added—"Miss Lawrence and the feller that was driving the other car are booked on a charge of manslaughter, Mr. Stebbins. The judge is going to see them in the morning. I presume——" He cleared his throat. "I presume for an investigation," he added mildly.

His manner was sympathetic, fatherly, regretful. There was a horrible detachment, a horrible inevitability about him, a wheel in the great machine of the law. Nothing could stop him.

"She'll not be here to-morrow!" Gail thought fiercely. "We'll send her away! She'll not be here to-morrow!"

"It was a question of bail," Fargo pursued, gently.

"I see," Dick said. "I'll be right down. I'll take care of everything. I'll be right over."

"Why, take your time, take your time," the officer, departing, said on a faintly protesting note.

"Manslaughter," Phil said slowly, in the dead silence that followed his going.

"I guess so, Phil. That's what he says."

"The child was killed?" Edith whispered.

"He said so."

"I can't believe it's us," Gail breathed.

"Where was it, Ariel?" This was Phil again.

"It was up back of the cement works, Phil, where the gas station is," Ariel broke her silence to explain.

She tried to speak naturally. But she was shaking.

"What happened?" Phil demanded, sitting down heavily in the old kitchen rocker, his eyes never leaving her own.

Ariel braced herself, half sitting, against the kitchen table, Gail beside her. Edith was bowed in one of the chairs, her face covered with her hands, her lips moving.

"It's horrible, of course," Ariel began impatiently, her lips white. "But—it's happened, and we just have to—make the best of it! It isn't my fault if drunken men go charging all over the road on Sunday."

"I can't believe it's *us*," Gail murmured again, as Ariel's haughty voice hesitated.

"We'll make the best of it, of course," Phil said gravely. "But tell us just what happened."

"Why, just this," Ariel began, in a voice she tried to make sound easy and natural. "A drunken idiot drove his car out into the middle of the traffic and forced our car over against the other side of the road, and we hit the car this little girl was in. That's all.

"I had no more to do with it than—well, Sam, here!"

But despite the bravado she looked frightened; she looked like the little girl she was. Her fair hair was crushed and tumbled, she wore no hat. Her face was white, and her eyes glittered feverishly. Like her hair, her white clothing was disordered and rumpled, and on the sleeve of her summer coat there was a rusty, twisted place that was streaked with oil and dust, and still wet.

"Your coat's—bloody," Gail said, in a whisper.

"That's nothing, Gail. Larry Barchi's hand was cut. It wasn't anything! You see," Ariel said gathering confidence, "we were coming down the road, and a big bus, one of the red coaches, was coming up. And over on our right was the slow traffic—we were inside the white lines, in the middle lane."

"Go on!" Phil urged, following closely, as she paused. His handsome honest face, Gail saw with a quick glance, was blanched.

"Well. This man—he was drunk—cut in from behind the bus, and came straight at us. They said he was going fifty an hour. He headed right at us, and we swerved to the right, do you see?—and this child was in the car we hit. It sort of swung 'round, and all the cars jammed, and everyone shouted.

"They say he'll lose his licence and get ten years in jail, and I hope he does! They say he didn't know, even then, that anything had happened."

There was a dead silence in the kitchen. Ariel tossed her head, and looked about fretfully.

"I'm starving. Have we had dinner?" she asked in a trembling, unnatural voice. She put up a shaking hand and smoothed her hair. Nobody answered.

Dick, who had followed the policeman out of the room for a few private words, had returned to the kitchen.

"It looks to me, from what Fargo says, as if it was up to the other fellow," Dick said now, sitting down beside Gail on the end of the table.

They all looked at him eagerly, frantic with hope.

"Did he say so, Dick!"

"I told you it was!" Ariel said resentfully.

"It doesn't matter who was to blame, if the dear little girl was killed," Edith said in her sweet, sad voice.

"Whose child was it, Dick?"

"Moss. A little girl named Janet Moss. Five years old."

"Five years old. My God!"

"He's the tailor, Phil," Gail supplied. "They live up on Figuroa Street. The mother often comes into the library."

"Fargo said their only child."

"No, they have another little girl. Not," Gail said, "that it makes it any better!"

"I don't know why you all look at me. I agree with you that it's simply terrible!" Ariel said quickly and hotly. "But you don't think I'm—I'm *enjoying* it?"

"Oh, shut up," Phil commanded her, brushing the little spurt of temper aside, his dark look not brightening.

"But—but Ariel wasn't to blame, Phil! It wasn't her fault, Dick. Why—why should they—why should they want to take her to jail?" Gail demanded, turning from one of the men to the other.

"She was in the car that hit the little Moss girl, Gail," Dick explained.

"Yes, but it wasn't *her* fault!"

"It's what they call a technical charge. Now, let's keep cool, everybody," Dick said, "and find out just where we stand. In the first place, what time was this, Ariel?"

"Ten minutes to six."

"And you and Buddy Raisch and the Barchi boy were in the car?"

"In Buddy's roadster."

"Was Dorothy Camp there?"

"No. Not then."

"Where was she?"

"She'd left us."

"Left you!"

"If you'll give me a chance," Ariel interrupted the interrogation with bitter patience, "I'll try to *tell* you. But I can't get anywhere if you keep looking as if I'd done all this as a joke!"

There was no answer to this. But Phil said drily, as if thinking aloud, "God knows it's no joke!"

"Was the Moss child walking, Ariel?"

"No, of course she wasn't walking! She was in their car, with her mother and father. They were driving the same way we were, only on the outside line. She was on the front seat, and when the car swung 'round she was thrown out. I didn't see it, because I didn't see anything at first. But afterward I saw them picking her up, and someone said she wasn't killed, and the ambulance came. They said my car did it—this policeman said my car did it. It all happened like lightning."

"*Your* car!" Dick echoed.

"You weren't driving, Ariel?" Gail asked in a sick tone.

"Yes, I was."

"You don't know how to drive!"

"Oh, yes, I do."

"Good God!" Phil whispered under his breath.

"Ariel—not when it happened—you weren't driving then?"

"I say I was, Gail." Ariel's weary, colorless face cracked with an unnatural smile; she looked about the circle scornfully, almost sneeringly.

"You all look so funny!" she gasped, shaking, trying to laugh. "You all take—things—so damn seriously!"

Gail tightened an arm about her shoulders.

"Pull yourself together, Ariel!" she said sharply. "You've gotten us all into horrible trouble, and been partly responsible for a little girl's death, and if you can't take it seriously, why, we *can,* that's all."

The reproof stung Ariel into sobriety as no soothing would have done. She looked frightened, subdued, young again.

"I didn't mean it, Gail!" she whispered.

"Well, of course you didn't mean it. But it's too late for that now. We'll have to go on from here. What were you doing driving Buddy Raisch's car? Are you *crazy?"*

"I've *told* you what I was doing. We were coming back from Monterey, and Buddy was sleepy, and so was Larry, and I was driving. We were in the middle lane, where you have a perfect right to be on that hill, and the bus was coming up—and I saw it perfectly well, and I knew the line on the right was where it was, and I was driving along, about twenty-five I guess, when this drunk came lunging out from behind the bus, straight into my face, and of course I had to jerk right—I couldn't jerk left into the bus, and I couldn't stop because of the cars behind me.

"I didn't think I'd bumped it very hard. It sort of shoved the car over. It swung around, it didn't turn over, even. The car—the car this drunk Miller was driving came head on, and hit our guards and smashed the headlights. They said it was badly smashed, but the man wasn't hurt, and at first I don't think they thought anyone was hurt. And then they saw this little girl on the grass.

"They ought to give him a life sentence!" Ariel said, trembling at the memory.

"Why wasn't Buddy driving, Ariel?" Gail asked, very gently, in a silence.

"He was sleepy, I told you. We were all up late last night, dancing. We were over at Monterey."

"Are the Camps staying there?"

"No. We just went there for dinner, Buddy and Larry and Dorothy and I. And then we stayed and danced. We were going to come home last night, but it was too late, so we stayed. Buddy felt sort of sick, anyway. He had some oysters or something."

"Mrs. Camp wasn't there?"

"No. Dorothy and I——" She paused. "Dorothy and I were there," she said pointlessly, unfathomed things in her eyes.

"After Gail went to Los Gatos you said you were going to Santa Cruz to have lunch on somebody's yacht, and stay with Dot over night," Edith put in, anxiously accusing.

"Yes. Well, we did; we had lunch on the Howards' yacht, in Santa Cruz. We were coming right back, and then afterward, when we were starting home, we saw the sign at Soquel—'Del Monte 38 miles'—and Larry said he dared us to go down there and have dinner and dance. This was about three, I guess, and—oh, well," Ariel diverged irrelevantly, "it was sunny, and everything seemed all right. So we started for Del Monte but then we thought that was too smart—we weren't exactly dressed for it—so we went to a place in Monterey, a nice place too, and we all wandered up and down the street, and bought things and had fun."

She fell silent on the word.

"We were just having—fun," she repeated.

"Go on!" Phil said.

"Well, then we cleaned up for dinner, and dressed—our suitcases were in the car—and we went over to the hotel and had dinner, and fooled around. But then the boys got sort of—silly," Ariel explained, scowling, "and we didn't know what to do with them. Larry wanted to go 'round the Seventeen Mile Drive, and Dot and I kept saying that no, we ought to start for home, and we had oysters somewhere.

"That was in Monterey. Then Buddy said that if we'd go over to Del Monte and dance he'd rush us home right after, so we agreed. But at the hotel he disappeared, and I didn't know where he was. Dorothy was dancing with Larry—I think they're engaged, Gail."

The forlorn attempt at diversion fell flat. Gail's face was stern.

"I don't know what I would have done," Ariel went on, "if Van Murchison hadn't come up. He wasn't dancing, he was just in the doorway, looking on for a minute, and I talked to him. Of course he said that I oughtn't to be there so late, and that you and Ede would be wild, and we went out and sat on the porch waiting for Buddy to show up. And then Van said that if he didn't have to play in a tournament there the next day he'd run me right home, but of course he couldn't. I told him Dorothy and I were all right at the hotel, and he said he blamed Mrs. Camp."

"I hate that woman!" Gail said passionately.

"Van took me home about half-past one, to the Monterey hotel," Ariel said, "and Dorothy was there."

"And what had happened to Buddy?"

"Well, he'd eaten these oysters, Phil, and he felt sick."

"Tell a new one!" Sam drawled.

"Well, he *had,* Sam!" Ariel repeated angrily, fighting sudden tears.

"And then, Ariel?"

"Dorothy and I were so scared we cried, and she was going to telephone her mother. But we thought that wouldn't do. So we locked our door and went to bed, and we made up our minds," Ariel added, in sudden viciousness, "that we'd never speak to those boys again, and I never will, either!"

"Never mind that now," Phil said gravely.

Ariel gave him a frightened look, and spoke more quietly.

"We hoped that that would be all there was to it, Phil. Dorothy and I went to sleep; I don't know when the boys got in; they were on another floor, anyway. We got up early this morning, and walked around

Monterey. We thought we'd come home on the train. But there wasn't any train except the one in the afternoon, so we walked over to find out about the bus. And we met the boys—they were all shaved and dressed and sober, of course, and they felt so sorry that we sort of forgave them, and we all went to breakfast, and then we were coming straight home. We packed, and we got started at about eleven, but we stopped at the Del Monte Links to see some of the golf."

She fell silent.

"Van wanted me to wait and come home with him this afternoon," she said. "I wish now that I had!

"We had some sandwiches at Los Gatos, at about three, and we came on over the Dumbarton Bridge, and Buddy kept feeling sicker and sicker, and Larry was half asleep. He and Dorothy kept fighting, I was squeezed in between them, and finally Dorothy said to stop the car for a minute, and she jumped out and said she was going to take a bus. She said the way Larry was driving we'd have an accident. They walked down the road, and they were laughing, and Dorothy kept shaking her head, and I kept honking the horn at them.

"No bus goes by there, anyway. But after a few minutes Dorothy signaled a car with a man and woman in it, and got in—I didn't think she really meant to, and Larry didn't, and it made us both pretty mad. We followed the car along, and kept honking, and she would look back and laugh.

"But I'll never forgive Dorothy Camp, not the longest day I live!"

"You were alone with the two boys, then, Ariel?"

"Yes, and Larry kept getting sleepier and sleepier."

"Where was this?"

"Up beyond Silver's Crossing, this side of the bridge, where the new gas station is."

"Then what happened?"

"Then Larry asked me to take the wheel, and said he'd sit right beside me and help me out if I got into a jam. I'd been driving yesterday. I've had the wheel lots of times. So we changed places. We were only seven miles out, and all I wanted to do——"

Her voice thickened, stopped.

"All I wanted to do was get *home,"* she said.

"Raisch was in the back all this time?"

"Asleep."

"All right."

"I drove along—you couldn't go fast in that traffic," Ariel continued. "I drove on until we came to the cement works, where the hill begins to go down. I saw the bus coming up, and I was just keeping my place in the line when the car ahead of me jumped forward and got clear, and this crazy drunk lunged up in front of me.

"It's an awful corner, Phil. They ought to widen it there and grade it! And it was so *hot,"* Ariel said, beginning to cry childishly, biting her lip.

"There was the—most—awful—crashing of glass and wood," she whispered, putting her head back, closing her eyes. Gail saw the perspiration shining on her white forehead, under the crushed hair. "Everyone began to shout and scream, and cars stopped every which way," she said. "They saw the little girl, and a man asked me if my car had hit her, and I said—I said I didn't know. I saw a man pick her up, and her hat sort of drop back . . ."

"Oh, my God!" Edith whispered in the pause.

"My car was jammed against theirs," Ariel said.

"But there didn't seem to be much harm done. The police came up—they were right there at the station—and they asked to see my license, and Buddy said that it was at home. But afterward at the station I told them I didn't have any. That was right, wasn't it, Dick?" Ariel asked with an appealing look.

"Well, of course!" Dick answered impatiently.

"They held us on a manslaughter charge," the innocent, hoarse young voice went on. "They wanted me to telephone home, but I wouldn't. The other policeman—the mean one, who kept asking Buddy if we had been drinking, and all that—telephoned the hospital, and they said the little girl was dead.

"I'd kept praying, 'Don't let her die, don't let her die!' but I guess it didn't do any good."

The recital was over. There was silence in the kitchen; no Lawrence could speak.

"I guess this other cop was McCann, wasn't he, Ariel?"

"McCann, yes."

"I'll go right 'round," Dick said, glancing at his wrist. "I know him, and I know Walsh. I'll see them to-night." He glanced about the paralyzed circle. "Now, don't take this too hard," he said. "It happens all the time. If they can hang it on him that he was drunk and that Ariel had the right of way they'll not hold her. She might be fined for driving without a license, that's all."

Gail's heart went to him, the big, homely, gentle, adequate friend and champion of the family, with so passionate a rush that she felt an emotion like a physical pain in her breast.

"About bail, Dick," Phil said, seeming all the more young and pitiful and poor because he was trying so hard to be businesslike and brisk.

"Oh, forget it!" Dick answered brusquely. "I'll fix it. I told Fargo that she's not going to run away. Don't worry about that."

Ariel came, white and weary and young, and stood before Dick and put her hands on his shoulders.

"Will you get me out, Dick?" she faltered.

"Why, sure I will!" he said, a little gruffly, smiling down at her as a big dog might look down on a puppy.

"I didn't mean to do it!" she whispered, her mouth trembling, her face crinkling into tears. And then in sudden irritation and disgust she exclaimed, "Gail, Gail, I'm going to be sick!"

"I *thought* so!" Gail sprang across the room. She and Edith had an arm apiece about the convulsed, slender little figure as they rushed it to the familiar sanctuary of the upper rooms.

CHAPTER XIV

TEN minutes later Gail went with Dick to the police station.

"I think it would look—better, to have one of you girls along," Dick suggested. Sam was left with Ariel; Edith and Phil walked up to Figuroa Street to call at the stricken home of the dead child.

"In all these years I've never been to the police station, Dick."

"Don't let the name scare you."

"It does scare me," she said in a silence. "It scares me horribly."

"I'm—I'm terribly sorry about this," Dick presently admitted reluctantly.

"Oh, *sorry!*"

"Of course, these Sunday motor accidents are in a class by themselves, Gail. It's not like a felony."

"It's not like one of the trials in the murder stories," she conceded, after thought.

"I ought to warn you. This Miller, the man who was driving the other car, might ask for a jury trial."

"Oh, Dick, no!" Her voice was weak with terror.

"He might. If he can exonerate himself, or prove that Ariel was even partly in the wrong."

Her heart pounded, raced—pounded again. They were getting out of Dick's car now at the City Hall. Basement windows gushed harsh light into the summer night; trees waved their branches restlessly, high up in the dark.

"Dick, will they find out that she was at Monterey with those boys?"

"They might."

"They shan't! I'll have her lie," Gail said fiercely.

"No, you can't do that. It's all—a mess," Dick said, sadly.

"But Dick, don't you see that with everyone here—everyone in Clippersville—she'll be ruined! They'll think she's the sort of girl who runs 'round to hotels with boys," Gail began, in an agony.

"It isn't the making of a thing public that hurts a girl," Dick suggested, with mild significance, after a pause.

"No, I know," Gail conceded quickly, shamed, stung into silence.

"If the case against Miller is strong enough they may dismiss the charge against Ariel," Dick pursued after a moment.

"If they do, she'll go away! I'll take her away! I'll never come back!" Gail breathed fervently.

"Oh, no; for they'll hold her as a witness, whatever they do," the man said. "Shall we—" he moved his head toward the building—"shall we go in?"

"Just a moment!" Gail had caught at his hands. "Are you sure we can't save her—can't say that Buddy was driving?" she stammered, delaying him.

"Not that way. But if they send for an assistant district attorney from San José—if they *do,*" Dick said, "I know them all down there, and I'll do what I can to keep the questions down. But you see, Gail, the trouble is in getting *into* a mess like this," he offered tolerantly.

"Oh, I know, I know!" She beat her palms together. "Oh, what a *fool* a girl is!" she whispered frantically.

"Poor kid!" Dick said.

"But what *possessed* her, Dick!"

"Oh, I don't know." He was silent, and they stood without speaking for a moment, in the dark outside the courthouse. "She wanted a good time," he said. "She's—of course, she's beautiful."

"She would have to leave town if it all came out," Gail decided, thinking aloud, speaking only half audibly. "Would it help if I said that I was with her?" she asked suddenly.

Dick gave a mirthless laugh.

"Gosh, you Lawrences are loyal! No," he answered, "it wouldn't help. They'd tear your evidence to pieces in five minutes. And then they'd have you up for perjury. No, the only thing to do is see McCann and Fargo, and have a talk with them, and see if we can get the charge dismissed. They'll have her for driving without a license, whatever we do."

"I can't—" she reverted to the words of an hour ago—"I can't believe it's *us*. I'm like a person in an awful dream."

"It's too bad!" Dick said again, inadequately.

"If you knew how I'm praying!" she said.

"Well, come on." He touched her arm. "Let's go in."

She imagined Ariel, bareheaded, frightened, shaken, descending these same steps, in dusty afternoon heat, and shuddered as she followed him.

The dark passage smelled of leather; there were double doors, big, lightly hung doors padded with shiny, dirty leather and studded with nail heads, opening into a low, dirty room that smelled of wood and rot.

There were bare, dangling lights, a man at a flat-topped desk, benches, fences, gates, men in uniforms coming and going, murmurs.

"Hello, Tex. Hello, Joe. Good-evening, Sergeant!" Dick said. He glanced at Gail. "This is Miss Lawrence's sister," he added.

"I've—I've seen you in the library, Sergeant," Gail said, bravely.

The sergeant looked suspicious; he was not to be won.

"Sorry to have your sister mixed into this, Miss Lawrence."

"Oh, it's terrible!" Gail said in a trembling voice.

"It's a bad business," the sergeant said, on a dark, reproachful note. "Hear that the little girl died?" he asked Dick.

Dick's face was solemn; he stood protectively beside Gail, but he looked at the other man.

"Yes. We heard that. Very sad. Terrible for them!" he said.

"You know I have a little girl of my own," the officer said.

"It's awful," Dick conceded.

"The young lady had no license," Walsh said, glancing up from his papers at Gail.

"If he thinks of us as poor he'll befriend us!" she thought. Aloud she said, "No, we have no car."

"It's an awful thing, you know, if a man can't take his wife and child out for a run," the officer reasoned, shaking his head, mumbling his words.

But he was kinder, and she knew it.

"Your little sister, hey?" he presently asked.

Her little sister, yes, she answered, suddenly shaken by tears. She went away, and sat on a desolate bench, and Dick talked to the sergeant. The atmosphere of the dreadful place oppressed Gail like a pall, and she had to keep telling herself that this ordeal, like every other, would soon be over.

Benches, spittoons, harsh dangling lights, and official cruelty: a horrible place! Gail started as Dick sat down beside her.

"Make a hit with the sergeant," he murmured; "he's been very decent!"

Gail went back to the desk, and smiled with blue eyes filled with tears.

"Thank you so much, Sergeant Walsh."

"Now you have your sister here at ten o'clock day after to-morrow, see?" the man said.

"Oh, yes—yes. I'll come with her."

"We didn't know who she was, at first." He shuffled papers, sighed. Gail felt all the shame of the lawbreaker; making trouble, causing distress. "It's too bad to have a little girl mixed into a thing like this!" Sergeant Walsh said.

"Oh, I know it," Gail murmured thickly, heartsick. He was probably thinking that *his* little girl never would run about Sunday roads with intoxicated boys, she reflected bitterly.

Dick took her away through the nail-studded doors and the smelly hall again; the country street was dark and quiet on a Sunday night. All the shops were closed, the market and the theater; the sweetness and peace of summer moonlight lay over Clippersville. Under the oaks, on the burned dry grass of the encircling hills, were inky blots of lace; the meadows swam in misty silver.

"Isn't there any way of letting her off, Dick? I mean of one of us taking her place on Tuesday?" Gail asked, walking to the car.

"Nope," he said decidedly. "I think they'll be decent to her. But the charge has been booked, do you see?"

"I don't see anything!" Gail exclaimed in despair.

"You mustn't take it that way," Dick said simply.

"Dick, what kind of a fool is a girl," Gail began passionately—"what kind of a *fool* is a girl to let herself in for this sort of thing?"

"Well, that's what you wonder!" he commented mildly.

"I don't know what we would have done without you," she said, wondering.

"I haven't done anything," Dick answered promptly.

Gail went on with her musing, not so much about Ariel now as about Dick. He seemed a very rock of strength to-night; she felt a passionate regret for all the times she had thought slightingly of him, treated him carelessly. Buddy Raisch, Larry Barchi, and Dorothy Camp had all failed Ariel. But big, homely, awkward, loyal Dick had not, and never would fail, any of the Lawrences. Gail felt puzzled, somehow.

She even was aware of a little self-consciousness with him to-night for the first time in her life. It was as if she had never seen him before. When they went back into the old kitchen, and he half sat and half leaned against the table in his usual way, she found herself studying him—fascinated by his ease, and his quick, emphatic use of words, and his adequacy in this crisis. Whenever he called her "Gail"—and he had called her by her name all her life—she felt an emotion of pleasure. Her starry blue eyes, under the heavy dark curve of the Lawrence lashes and the dense brows, were fixed anxiously, yet confidently, upon him. There was no color in her tired face.

"Walsh will do all he can; I don't think we need worry," Dick said. "Barchi and the Raisch boy were both gone—out on bail—when we got there, but they say there's no question they both had been drinking. It was natural enough for them to think Ariel had been drinking, too. I think I got it over that she hadn't been."

"It comes up Tuesday?" Phil asked.

"Tuesday. It'll come up before Joe Gates, and I know him well. I'm going to see him to-night, if I can. To-morrow, anyway."

"What's the worst that can happen to Ariel, Dick?"

This was Edith from the arm of Phil's chair, where she sat leaning against him.

"What I think'll happen," Dick said, reflecting, "is that the charge against Ariel will be dismissed, and that she'll be retained as a witness. But there may be damages—from Moss."

"But wouldn't," Gail demanded quickly—"wouldn't Miller have to pay them?"

"You don't know that. Miller might sue."

The two girls exchanged anxious looks.

"Oh, *dear!*" Gail wailed again. She looked at Phil. "Another mortgage, just as we were clear!" she said philosophically.

"No, I wouldn't mortgage the place again," Phil said deliberately. "I'd borrow on my insurance policy this time."

"Phil, are you insured?" asked both sisters, surprised and impressed.

"I took out some a little while ago." His colorless skin, as clear as a girl's, flushed suddenly. He looked at Dick and laughed a little uncomfortably.

Dick gave Gail a look full of significance and understanding. And when her own smile and sudden flush had answered it, somehow Gail did not wonder or care about the insurance or even about the accident or about anything any more. A funny feeling, strange, shaking, sweet, inundated her for a few bewildered seconds, and she lost the thread of the conversation.

"Phil's insured himself because he wants to marry Lily!" Edith said to Gail when they were alone, later.

"I know it."

"This," Edith said solemnly, "is real trouble, Gail."

"I know it," Gail agreed again.

"We thought we knew what trouble was before."

"I know."

They looked gravely at each other.

"I can't believe that I went off to Los Gatos only yesterday, never dreaming of any of this!"

"I suppose we go to work just as usual to-morrow?"

"Well, I'll have to," Gail said, "because Mr. Wilcox will have to be at home. The funeral will probably be Tuesday."

"I forgot the Wilcox baby!" Edith said, struck.

Lying in bed, with her bedside droplight shining green on the pages of Strickland's *Queen Elizabeth,* Gail went over the whole bewildering panorama. She was at Far Niente again, slipping away with Mason in the car. It seemed impossible that she had ever cared what happened or didn't happen at Far Niente.

And then she was home again, gossiping with Edith, making new resolutions, determined to put away from her Van Murchison and everything for which he stood; determined to be a good sister, to do her whole duty by the family, once and for all. Then had come the supper under the oak and the sobering news of poor Francis Wilcox's baby.

And then, suddenly, horribly, Ariel crying like a little wounded animal in the kitchen, "Gail! Gail! Phil!"

Ariel, plunging them all into this confusion, fear, and terror, and weeping and being sick and falling off to sleep just as she had wept and been sick and drifted peacefully off to sleep all her life long.

The dim bulk of the City Hall in the dark, and the strange, dismal odors of the police court. A police court, and the Lawrences in it, and a charge against Ariel!

Gail shuddered, looked at her book. The incredible had happened: this was real trouble. This was disgrace.

But she could not quite forget a new note, a new thread of friendship and happiness that had somehow come of it all. Dick's sternly concerned face as he first listened to Ariel's story, the authority with which he had assumed command of the situation, and his manner in the police station—definite, unfrightened, and friendly—all these seemed to create a new Dick, or rather to put an unknown person in Dick Stebbins's place. Protecting—self-reliant—devoted to the Lawrences.

Van would be tremendously concerned, too, of course. Van, who might have saved Ariel all this if he had acted quickly enough last night over at Monterey. If he had realized . . .

But then, why should he? Had any of them realized the deadly danger into which Ariel was drifting? If her family's influence could not keep her at home, why should that of a man she hardly knew bring her back there?

"Except, of course," ran Gail's reasoning thoughts, "except, of course, that we never dreamed she would be over there alone with Dorothy and the boys, and he knew that she was."

Dorothy. Gail decided that she hated that smiling, pie-faced little Dorothy Camp! The sort of mild, soft-voiced girl who got other girls into scrapes, always managing to extricate herself. Dorothy had been safe at home when the accident happened. Gail hated to think of Dorothy's honeyed little voice saying, "I couldn't stand it. I knew there would be something like that!"

A spasm of sheer pity for Ariel stirred Gail. Poor little Ariel, hot and tired and frightened, trying to drive a car through the Sunday traffic with a couple of heavy, half-intoxicated boys for her only companions. It was horrible.

Gail brought her eyes resolutely to her book. But instead of the printed lines there rose before her inner vision the picture of a hard, lean, serious young man leaning over a police sergeant's desk. Dick Stebbins was in the kitchen again, awkward, earnest, adequate. She was in the courtroom with Dick Stebbins.

She closed her book, put out the light. Vague moonshine came in at the window; where there was no moonshine the shadows were very black. The house was quiet now, everyone was asleep.

Gail was floating, drifting, sinking, and rising on a sea of dreams.

CHAPTER XV

THE big courtroom upstairs was very hot. Someone had drawn the shades at the high, old-fashioned windows, but they shut out air as well as sunshine, and the atmosphere was almost insufferable.

Outside in the square the usual dusty cars were parked, and the usual buying and selling was going on. Gail could hardly believe that this tense, dark, dirty place of fear and shame had been in existence yesterday and last year, and would be going on through all the years with the happy, marketing world so near and so uncaring.

"It's kinder like a play," Sam whispered. She nodded anxiously and nervously. Phil and Edith were with her; the fifth Lawrence, white and frightened, and looking less than her seventeen years, was inside the fence. Dick was with Ariel. Sometimes they whispered together; often she looked at her brothers and sisters.

There were few persons in the room; very little publicity had been given to this part of the proceedings, at all events. Flies buzzed, messengers came and went, men rustled papers at the dark old leather-covered tables. Outside the windows, above the shades, the tops of the elm trees could be seen moving in a hot wind.

Gail's heart beat fast with a suffocating nervousness. When Joe Gates, with whom she had often danced, came into court, and everyone rose respectfully, she watched him with apprehension.

Dick and Ariel went up to the desk at once and talked to the judge, who looked from face to face seriously, biting his lips as he listened. He called Officer Fargo; Gail prayed wildly. Her heart was choking her. Then Ariel and Dick came down and joined the others.

"The case against Ariel is dismissed," Dick said in a whisper. "So far so good!"

"What—what—what do you mean!" Gail stammered.

"Judge Gates dismissed the case against Ariel."

"Oh, no!" Gail whispered. They had hooped their line of chairs into a half-circle, their clean-skinned, pale Lawrence faces all close together.

"Gosh, what luck!" Phil breathed on a long sigh.

"Miller was drunk," Dick explained, his words barely audible, barely formed with his lips. "He's been arrested before. Ariel's fined fifteen dollars for driving without a license."

"My God, what luck!" Phil said, actually praying.

"You mean they're not going to try her for anything, Dick?"

"The case is dismissed."

They couldn't believe it. Their eyes moved solemnly toward each other.

"We can't—Ariel and all—we can't go, Dick?"

"Sure you can. But they're going to try Miller, and they'll want Ariel back as a witness for the State. They'll have to swear in a jury first," Dick whispered back.

Very quietly they all went out into the hot sunlight. Edith hurried to Müller's, Gail to the library. There was strangeness and excitement in the week-day morning air. It was queer to go into the library at twenty-five minutes past ten; everything was queer.

Ariel stayed close to Gail. She was subdued and silent, and jumped nervously when Dick came to get her at half-past eleven. They might want her at court, Dick said.

They had hardly gone when Van Murchison came in, big-eyed over the case. Gail found herself instantly affronted by his air of keen enjoyment. It mattered not to Van what caused the excitement, so that there was excitement.

"They dismissed the case against your sister," he said.

"I know. It wasn't her fault," Gail answered.

"She was darned lucky!" Van commented. "There's a mob of people over there now," he added. "Miller's not going to plead guilty after all. He's going to fight."

"I suppose so," Gail conceded disdainfully. But her heart sank.

"Wouldn't you know that Dot Camp and her mother would beat it?" the boy asked.

"Beat it?"

"Yep. They left this morning for Tahoe."

Gail merely elevated her eyebrows. But she was conscious of a sort of inner shriveling, a blighting anger.

"Pretty soft for Dot!" Van said, still with his air of relish. "She got out of the car, didn't she?"

"It seems so."

"Why?" he persisted. "Were Larry and the Raisch boy so drunk?"

"Oh, I don't know, Van!" Gail exclaimed, frantic, and reaching across him to take the books from some reader's hand.

Van lingered.

"Miller's going to claim they were, anyway," he said, when he and she could whisper again.

"Claim what?"

"That Larry and Buddy Raisch were intoxicated."

She began to be frightened again. What could they prove against Ariel? What would the world think of Ariel, and of all the Lawrences, after this?

"Dick Stebbins is over there with her," Van further reported. The name meant strength and reassurance to Gail.

"Dick's defending her."

"How d'you mean?" Van demanded, with a laugh.

"He's—looking out for Ariel," she said, flushing brightly. Van's laugh seemed somehow to make Dick's claims contemptible.

"Who? Stebbins?"

"Certainly. He's a lawyer."

"Studying to be one, you mean?"

"No. Graduated. He took two years in one."

"I thought he and your brother were doing night work?"

"They are. Dick's taking post-graduate work in international law."

"What do you know about that!" Van laughed. He mused. "D'you s'pose he knows a damn thing about law?" he asked.

"Yes, I do," Gail said coldly. But the effect of her anger was only to amuse Van, who went away promising to return with news when there was any.

Later Dick himself came in and stood resting his elbows on the high desk, smiling at Gail until she was free to speak to him. Gail turned to him anxiously, her thick brows meeting.

"How's—how's it going, Dick?"

The exquisite reassurance of his wide, kindly smile.

"Oh, fine! Everything O. K. Phil's gone to get Edith, to take her to lunch, and he sent me for you."

The strange, solemn quality of the day continued. There was a sense of protection, a novelty, in this walking beside Dick Stebbins through the hot, quiet streets at midday. Across the street to court, and then around the corner to the Dairy Cafeteria; the Lawrences found a corner for themselves and their trays, and sat talking. It was all thrilling; even to Gail it was not all unpleasant.

"Don't let them get you fussed, Ariel," Dick advised. "King Younger will rattle you if he can."

"He oughtn't to say what isn't true!" Ariel, in whose cheeks two spots of red were burning feverishly, said resentfully.

The cafeteria's window shades flapped in a hot breath of wind. The knife grinder's bell went clanging by in the street. All over Clippersville to-day lay the scent of brush and forest fires.

"There's nothing in snappy answers, Ariel. You say what's true, and if you can't remember, say so."

"Mr. Younger said that my car must have been going at fifty an hour. How *could* it be, Dick, in that traffic!"

"Oh, nobody believed that!"

They all went back to court together. Gail's heart beat painfully when Ariel was called, and when she saw her little sister, pale and composed and frightened, taking the stand.

"You are not accustomed to driving, Miss Lawrence?"

"No."

"Never have taken a driver's examination?"

"No."

"You have no car yourself?"

"No."

"And no car in the family?"

"No. We have no car."

"But your friends have cars, and you sometimes drive them. Is that it?"

"Yes. That's—that's it."

"And how long would it be, Miss Lawrence, since you began to drive? About when did you first have your hands on a steering wheel?"

"I think about a year ago."

"That would have been last August?"

"A little before that, maybe."

"A little before that. Family know you were driving?"

"No. I don't think so."

"The family didn't know you were driving. But you used to go off with your friends, and then you would drive?"

Ariel made no answer. Her eyes met Gail's; her cheeks were very red. The court looked quietly at the Miller attorney, and Younger slightly changed his tone.

"You consider yourself a competent driver, Miss Lawrence?"

"Yes," Ariel said, goaded into a sharper, more definite tone, "I think I am!"

"Now, about these young men who were with you, Miss Lawrence. They had taken you to Monterey on the Saturday night, as I understand it, and you were all coming home?"

The shame of it, before all these old friends and neighbors! Gail felt her throat pressing her, thick and dry. She dared not look around.

"We were coming home."

"Had these boys been drinking that day?"

"No."

"They hadn't been drinking that day?"

"They may have had a cocktail before lunch," Ariel said.

"I object to this line of questioning, your Honor," the assistant district attorney said, rising from his seat which was close beside Dick's. "Neither of Miss Lawrence's companions were driving at the time of the accident, and what was the state of their minds or health has nothing to do with this affair, one way or another." He sat down and conferred once more with Dick.

"I don't think it matters what was the condition of the witness's companions, do you, Mr. Younger?" Joe Gates asked mildly.

"Well, take it another way then," King Younger began again. "These boys were pretty tired on that particular Sunday afternoon; they'd been up late, let's say; they'd been dancing and having a good time. They were so tired on the way home that the other young lady who was in the party felt it necessary to leave the car. She was frightened." He appealed to the jury. "She felt that any inconvenience, any difficulty in getting home, was preferable to the risk she ran in remaining——"

"I object to these questions, your Honor!" the assistant district attorney said promptly.

"Let me remind you, Mr. Younger," the judge said dispassionately, "that the case against Miss Lawrence has been dismissed."

"We propose to prove, your Honor," said the irrepressible Younger, "that the Saturday night party . . ."

But they did not bring Dorothy's name into it; they did not bring Dorothy's name into it at all! Gail felt an absolute sickness of anger, deep within her, as she watched gallant little Ariel, white to the lips, facing the brunt of the storm, and thought of Dorothy, safe and protected, up at the lake, and noted Van, loitering at the courtroom door, interested—amused primarily, even if he were not unsympathetic—but remote and secure!

Roadhouses. Drinking. Overnight hotels. And no one caught, no one to blame except Ariel!

"If girls," argued King Younger—"if girls are to be allowed to run off alone to country hotels, without older persons—if there is to be drinking, gambling, speeding—for the Raisch car was going at close to fifty miles an hour——"

"I must ask you to confine your remarks to the matter in hand, Mr. Younger," said Judge Gates sharply. "You will have an opportunity, in the summing up, to bring out any point that has been omitted."

Five minutes later the Lawrences, scared and white, but beginning to breathe again, were out in the street. Ariel's ordeal was over.

Dick brought the verdict to Gail late that afternoon.

"The jury wasn't out fifteen minutes. Guilty. They say Miller'll get five years."

"Dick, is that the end of it?"

"The end!"

"Oh, my God, I am grateful!" Gail whispered, tears in her eyes.

"Phil went up to tell Edith. And Van Murchison took Ariel off for a drive. He's going to have her home well before six," Dick reported.

"Could you dine with us, Dick?"

"Not to-night. I'm going over to Stanislaus, to see Mother. Gee," Dick added youthfully, after thought, "I wish you could get Ariel to stop running with that bunch of rotters!"

"Oh, she's cured *now,*" Gail predicted. "When it's too late," she added sadly.

"Can you figure Dorothy getting out from under?"

A deep resentful flush rose in Gail's face; she set her jaw.

"No words for it," she said briefly. "Dot's twenty-five, and Ariel seventeen," she added. "And she lets her in for a thing like this!"

"I don't believe any man would bother with Dorothy, if it wasn't for Ariel!"

"Well, we've been fools," Gail said grimly.

"I don't see that *you've* been a fool," Dick protested, surprised. Gail laughed, a little fluttered, looked down as she stamped a book, looked up.

She looked straight into his face, noted the line of jaw, the wide-apart, wide-open gray eyes. Her eyes fell to the big hand on the desk, with his old cap in the fingers. The shabby old library in the jaded last heat of an autumn day seemed to lift and quiver with light.

"Dick, how are we ever going to thank you?"

"Oh, cut it!"

"And *you* know," she said, leaning toward him, looking at him with her heavy brows anxiously knitted—"you know what a child she is, Dick? That there is nothing wrong about Ariel—just mischief, and wanting to have a good time!"

"She's so pretty," he said, "that she can get away with murder."

"You don't think people will remember this against her, Dick?"

"Oh, I suppose the old tabbies will whisper about it, for awhile."

Something in his half-amused, half-scornful smile electrified her, and Gail, marveling at her own sensations, could not immediately answer.

"She'll just have to live it down," she presently said, wondering if her words had any meaning.

"Oh, sure."

He still lingered, and Gail asked, with a sudden rush of smiles and color, "Is it fun to be a lawyer, Dick?"

Marvelous!" he said.

"I never thought of it before. Oh, wait," she said, looking in a drawer. "Look at the excuse a small Italian child sends in with a ruined book," she said, putting a slip of paper on the desk.

Their heads were close together. Gail wondered what he would do, what the dull, browsing occupants of the library would do, if she suddenly kissed him on the temple.

He looked up, with his kindly grin.

"You must get a great kick out of these kids in here!"

"Oh, I do."

The waters of the great sea were drawing her—drawing her away from solid ground. Gail was deeply, subconsciously aware of a fear that she would betray herself.

"Suppose," she thought, smiling her mysterious smile at him, "he suddenly leaned across here, and caught at my hands, and said, 'I love you!' "

"What's the matter?" Dick asked.

"Nothing. I just felt—a little—giddy. Reaction, I suppose."

"Well, let me know how things go with the Formaldehydes!" he said.

For twenty minutes after he went away she knew neither where she was, nor what she was doing or saying.

Then she went up to Müller's and joined Edith, and they walked home together, happy, exhausted, grateful.

"It's frightful," Edith conceded, of the recent events, "to have Ariel arrested, cross-examined as a witness, and all that. But I am grateful to God that everything's turned out as it has."

They stopped for lettuce, tomatoes, peaches.

"Let me take that box of peaches, Ede!"

"My darling, they're not heavy!"

"What happened to all the stewed blackberry juice?"

"It's there. In the ice box."

"I think I'll make big glasses of a sort of lemony punch, and use it up. This weather it gets furry in about twenty-four hours."

"Gail," Edith said, as they walked on, "as long as I can have times like this with you, I never shall marry! I mean it. I've made up my mind."

"They *are* fun!" Gail conceded affectionately. And she hugged her amazing, strange new secret to her heart as if it were a living thing.

Ariel came in a few minutes after dinner preparations were under way, and both older sisters glanced at her fearfully. She was quieter than usual, but she looked lovely, her face flushed, her hair flyaway gold under her white hat.

"Did you have a nice drive, darling?"

"Oh, heavenly!" Ariel said, with a weary sigh and a sober face.

"Couldn't bring Van back to supper?"

"Didn't think to ask him."

"Nice of him to take you off; it was so hot," Gail approved.

"It's cold enough now," Ariel said lifelessly. The autumn evening had indeed descended with fog and chill after the hot day.

"Do you like him?" Gail asked encouragingly.

"Oh, he's darling," Ariel said listlessly. "Not that it makes any difference," she added bitterly.

"Ah, don't say that, dear!" Both sisters dreaded this mood, when she would be resentful and dark for awhile, and end up with hysterical laughter, hysterical tears, and physical collapse.

"Well, why should it matter, in this jay place! You don't suppose Van'll stay here one minute longer than he has to, do you?" Ariel demanded angrily. "I'm sick of it! I'm sick of it!" she said, in a sullen undertone.

"Somebody has had an exciting day," Edith began, with that assumption of maternal indulgence that somehow sat so oddly upon her, "and wants her supper and bed."

"Oh, shut up, Edith!" Ariel said angrily. Edith, with a glance at Gail, shrank into silence, coming and going about dinner preparations without further word. Ariel fell sullenly silent, too, and there was a pause before Gail said, evenly and quietly:

"You mustn't speak to Edith like that, Ariel. Say you're sorry."

"Oh, she doesn't have to!" Edith was flushed, uncomfortable, martyred, and generous all at once.

"Of course I'm sorry," Ariel muttered.

Sam came in and lighted the gas above their heads; dusk had deepened almost into darkness.

"Sam, you're an angel!" Edith said gratefully, still trembling.

"I suppose, jail or no jail, we eat sometimes?" Sam asked by way of answer, kissing the back of Gail's neck where the thick, tawny tendrils of hair curled up like a baby's hair.

"Gail, is this bowl big enough for the tapioca?"

"Better take the old brown one. Tapioca pudding smells awfully if it bubbles all over the oven floor."

"Listen. There's a swell film at the Liberty tonight. Want to go, Ariel?"

"No, thanks," Ariel began to answer steadily, but her voice shook suddenly, and her words came in a rush. "I don't want to go and have every old church-going, psalm-singing, cake-sale-making old woman in this town pointing me out," she said in a low tone. "I don't want my clothes to come from Müller's any more, I don't want sodas at Dobbins', and dances at Oddfellows' Hall. I'm sick to death of this whole place, and this house, and tapioca pudding, and being poor! I'm not going to stand it, either! I'm going down to Hollywood if I have to walk there, and I'm going——"

"Ah, sweetheart, you'll only make yourself ill!" Gail pleaded, close beside her now, sitting on the arm of Ariel's chair, with one arm about the younger sister's shoulders. "Don't get yourself all wrought up.

Listen, darling—listen. If the Whites do give a fancy-dress party, and we give a birthday party——"

She stopped, for Ariel, looking at her with a trembling laugh of scorn, broke as suddenly into tears, and was laughing and crying in the familiar manner before any one of them could attempt to divert her. Guided by Gail, she stumbled from the room and upstairs, sobbing incoherently and now beginning to feel wretchedly sick—cold, hot, nauseated, dizzy.

Edith sent a sympathetic glance after them as she dragged the old iron kettle forward. Ariel must have a hot-water bottle immediately.

Gail turned down the wide old bed and flattened the pillows; she carried a fresh nightgown to the poor little convulsed figure, kept an arm about the shaking shoulders. She lowered the shades, lighted a bead of gas, slipped the hot rubber bag comfortingly in between the old linen sheets.

And all the while her heart sang on a strengthening and rising note, "Dick—Dick—Dick." Gail caught a glimpse of herself in one of the great mirrors: a sapphire-eyed girl in a blue kitchen gingham relieved by a wide white collar, with heavy eyebrows under a thatch of tawny-gold hair, and cheeks that looked the paler because of the scarlet of the wide mouth.

It was good to be twenty-three, and to have Dick in the world! Gail felt that she had never been so near to Ariel, never had loved her so dearly.

When she came blinking out into the upper hall Phil was waiting.

"All right?"

"Oh, she's fine. Just worn out, that's all. It's been a terrible day for her, poor kid! She doesn't want any supper, but she wants us all to come up afterward and talk to her, and she wants some books."

And so downstairs to the dear familiar plates and lights, the peach tapioca and the blackberry punch, the eager conversation that was punctuated with laughter and supplemented by the books they always dragged in somehow, for reference or support.

"Wonderful to have it cold again!" Edith said.

"Wonderful!" Gail echoed. But it was not the autumn coolness that made her heart sing and float like a skylark. The secret was always with her, and when she forgot Dick for a second it was delicious suddenly to remember him again.

She listened to the others' conversation demurely, holding herself a little aloof, as if with the instinct of awakening womanhood she was already reserving herself somewhat for Dick's sake. She liked to sit smiling, dreaming, half aware of the talk that went on about her. Gail had never had any feeling like this in her life before; she had never known that there was such a feeling.

Here she sat, just as she had sat on a thousand, two thousand, nights since her father had died—Gail Lawrence, in a blue kitchen apron, nibbling biscuits and sipping lemonade. But to-night everything was changed, and the world seemed wider and kinder, more full of promise than it had ever seemed before.

"Dick," she thought. "Dick. Dick. Dick. Dick."

And at the realization that he might quite naturally come into the dining room, and sit here visibly under the rasping gaslight, she felt actually faint with ecstasy.

Van . . . but then Van did not matter any more, nor Far Niente, nor the Chipps' stately Clippersville mansion with its servants and awnings and clipped lawns. All false, all valueless—at least to her. Laughing at everything, turning everything into a joke, making nothing of the real things—love and loyalty and service. Their ways were not her ways, nor their thoughts her thoughts.

Van had come grinning into the library to-day; Ariel's predicament was to him "priceless," he "loved it." His little tag phrases fitted the moment of Gail's agony just as they fitted any crisis at the bridge table, or on the polo field. No use to turn to him for understanding or sympathy or advice; those things simply did not exist in his world.

"You don't like Van as well as you did," Edith guessed shrewdly in the days that followed.

"No—but still I like him," Gail answered defensively.

CHAPTER XVI

THEY were in Ariel's room, and Ariel lying on her bed reading old magazines, on the Sunday afternoon following the accident. Outwardly, everything was just as usual, but Gail was conscious of changes in the air. Or perhaps they were not changes; perhaps it was only that she had come to see existing facts clearly, facts that had been concealed from her for a long time.

Gail had been asked by Van to dinner up at the Chipps' the night before, and had declined. The thrilling prospect of shabby, quiet Dick Stebbins's company at the Lawrence house had made anything the Murchisons did or did not do unimportant. Van, laughing, inconsequent, had then asked Ariel.

But Ariel, in a bored, cold little voice, had amazed her family by declining, too. Van, undaunted—nothing daunted them when they were out for amusement!—had then suggested that Ariel come with him and try the Café de Paris, which was rather gay on a Saturday night, and where they could dance.

There had been some hesitation over this on Gail's part; Ariel was not yet eighteen, after all. But in the end it had been arranged that Ariel and Van should go, to be back by ten o'clock. And quite unruffled, scowling faintly, noncommittal, Ariel had dressed herself and had gone.

At five minutes after ten Van had returned her duly, and had come in himself for some desultory, aimless, laughing talk with Gail, Edith, and Sam. He had wanted, with his usual inexhaustible energy where amusement was concerned, to "stir up something," to "raise hell somewhere;" but Gail, dreamy and ecstatic after a perfectly commonplace dinner hour at which Dick had been a guest, had refused coöperation, and even Ariel had seemed strangely indifferent and weary. Edith had brightly suggested parcheesi, which all the group played violently at times, but somehow there had been no enthusiasm to-night, and in the end Van had departed, unsatisfied, at about half-past ten, and the girls had gone to bed.

To-day, Sunday, Ariel had seemed languid and depressed, and Edith and Gail, happy in the usual sunshiny routine of beds and dishes, church and endless chatter, had been gradually infected by her mood. Gail, in a cautious undertone as they washed the breakfast dishes, had reported to Edith that Ariel had called Van Murchison on the telephone at about ten.

Edith's quick, sensitive glance had studied Gail's face.

"Gail, would you care?"

"What? If he liked her?"

"Well . . ."

"My dear, I'd be perfectly delighted! It would get her away from this place, which she hates."

"But darling," Edith had protested lovingly, "he's *yours.*"

"Never!" Gail had said with an honest laugh. "I think from what she said at the telephone—she talked very low," she had resumed, "I think that he wanted her to go off somewhere to lunch with him."

"The Chipps'?"

"I couldn't tell."

"Gail, if I really thought you didn't care, I'd *pray* about it!" Edith had said passionately.

"Wouldn't it be wonderful!"

"Oh, my *dear.*"

"I got a little fun out of it," Gail had then analyzed the situation musingly. "I mean, I loved the excitement and knowing persons like the Chipps. But I never got —anything, really, out of Van."

"Abigail Lawrence, he adored you!"

"No, no—he liked me. I amused him. We were like two boys. Really we were," Gail had persisted, as Edith began a significant smile. "He never put his finger tip on me—he doesn't make love! Or at least he didn't to me," she had finished, thinking aloud, feeling for words.

"Ariel would have him where she wanted him in five minutes!" Edith had predicted, perhaps half hoping to be contradicted.

"I believe she would. Men are different with different girls," Gail had conceded thoughtfully.

Now, upstairs in Ariel's room, they reverted to the subject.

"I like Van," Gail said. "But I think he's terribly giddy."

"What would you want him to be, a priest?" Ariel demanded unsympathetically.

"Don't you have the feeling he's always laughing at everything, Ariel?"

"No," Ariel answered stubbornly, scowlingly, "I don't."

"Oh, I do," Gail said patiently. She was automatically attentive to Ariel. But her soul was taking flights into the very blue of heaven.

"I want to go away, Edith and Gail," Ariel presently said quietly. "Phil can make a fuss if he wants to. Or he can help me. I don't much care. But I'm going away from Clippersville."

They looked at her sorrowfully. She had said this many times before; she had been saying it indeed since her fourteenth summer.

But this was serious. Ariel had refused to return to school after the accident. Phil, conceding her a week of holiday, had talked to Mrs. Tripp, the principal. Mrs. Tripp, who had daughters of her own, had put the case plainly to Phil. Ariel Lawrence had been going too fast and too far for some time. Mrs. Tripp did not feel in the least happy about the dear child. A good boarding school, at her age . . .

This had frightened Gail and Phil. They had not mentioned it to the others, least of all Ariel. They had no money for boarding school, even supposing that Ariel would go.

But very probably Ariel would rebel. She seemed older, harder, colder, in these few days. She might become herself again, their old beautiful, wayward, poetic little sister, after awhile. But the problem was how to manage her now.

In other ways, the accident had borne fruit that might be salutary. Buddy Raisch and the Barchi boy had acted like the cads they were. They had disclaimed all responsibility; Ariel would never see either again. Buddy had been sent back to an Eastern school, Larry had gone to San Francisco to stay with an aunt and take special coaching. Neither one had come to see the Lawrences or had reassured Ariel by sharing the blame for the crash in any way. Dorothy Camp and her mother had disappeared; *they* were not involved.

But if all this was to sober and develop Ariel, she gave no sign of it. The events of the past week had seemed to embitter her, to accentuate her familiar impatience with Clippersville and life in it. On Saturday afternoon Gail had found her toiling over a typewritten letter, supposedly to some moving-picture concern. She had seen Ariel enclosing snapshots, presumably of herself—her beautiful little golden-headed self.

Poor little butterfly, caught in the trap of poverty, pettiness, shabbiness, and general small-town ugliness! Ariel was only one of a thousand, a million, girls, all over the country who were dreaming of Hollywood, contracts, admiration, excitement.

"She'd not mind marrying a man like Van," Gail thought. "She'd know how to manage him. She wouldn't want more than he could give! . . . We seem to be growing up pretty fast all of a sudden."

She, Gail, had grown up anyway. She was a woman now, because she loved a man. It made her feel solemn, consecrated. It was quite unlike any feeling she had ever known before. There was no confusing this grave sense of destiny, this conviction of possessing and being possessed, with all the trivial love affairs of earlier years. This feeling had nothing to do with "cases" and "crushes." Deeply, eternally, she was Dick's—for sorrow or joy, their two lives were indissolubly united.

She could even feel a little heartache for the girlhood she must leave behind her. Love, marriage, wifehood—these were solemn things. Gail experienced a premonitory pang. It was not all fun, saying good-bye to being giddy, free Gail Lawrence. It was not all fun, this strangely thrilling happiness, fear, and pain that inundated her heart.

They were still gossiping and idling comfortably in Ariel's room, and the old clock in the hall had struck three in Sunday stillness, when a door slammed downstairs, and Gail, flushed and tumbled, descended to find Dick himself in the kitchen.

Going downstairs, her heart rose on wings, and she felt suffocated, but when she saw him her mood experienced a sudden chill. Dick had on the old tweeds he had bought at a sale at Bern Brothers' two years ago; his pockets were full of packages.

Suddenly, seeing him so, commonplace and unexciting, in the darkened kitchen, Gail found him entirely uninteresting; her dreams melted into everyday air, and she felt ashamed and confused. Dick Stebbins in one's dreams indeed! It was a desecration of their filmy fabric even to think of him in such a connection.

He glanced at her with a quiet grin as she came in. He was unloading various cans and packages from his pockets—deviled ham, cream, rolls, butter.

Gail felt as remote from him as if she had never seen him in her life before. He was nothing, nobody; she disliked him because she had made herself a fool over him in her own soul.

"Oh, are we picnicking?" she asked blankly.

"Aren't we?" he demanded, stopping short.

"Well, we *can,*" Gail conceded graciously.

"What's the big idea?" Dick asked with an astonished look.

Her blood rose at once. Of course they would picnic! The peaches—the end of the chocolate cake—the cold salmon.

She began to put peeled tomatoes, lettuce, fish into a deep glass jar. Dick Stebbins! Why, he was the same country boy he had always been. Nice enough. The salt of the earth.

"What in heaven's name was that!" she exclaimed, taken unaware.

A microscopic Airedale puppy, looking as small and forlorn as only a little Airedale can look, was walking waveringly on the sink board, and had emitted an acid cry.

"Oh, I found him in the road," Dick explained, "and I brought him along. I thought you might like him!"

At the sound of his voice—just his amused, kindly, quiet voice—the magic began again, unwelcome and confusing. Gail's heart turned over, and the kitchen floor swayed a little under her feet.

"He looks about half starved," Dick said, fondling him with a big lean hand.

Gail trembled; she could not raise her eyes or find her voice as she put a saucerful of milk before the newcomer. The faltering little furry legs staggered toward it, the baby smelled it feebly, turned away.

"Here, old pal—try it," Dick said, pressing the little soft head down. The puppy sneezed, and looked pathetically at Gail, his whiskers coated with milk.

He licked them—brightened. Absorbed, Dick ducked his head toward the milk again. The forlorn little wisp of a tail stirred enthusiastically.

"Ah, he's darling!" Gail said, completely shaken. The world was swimming in strange, prismatic lights. She loved—loved—loved this big clumsy man in the tweeds! Something happened to her heart when Dick's big hand gently guided the stupid little eager puppy nose toward the saucer.

"D'you really want him?"

"Why, of course I want him!" Ordinarily she might have laid her creamy cheek against the tumbled little coat, looked up at Dick over the puppy's head with shining sapphire eyes, her lashes wide open, her heavy brows lifted. But she felt stiff and awkward now, conscious of every muscle, every fiber in her body. "I'll fix him a box!" she said, thickly and ineloquently. Every particle of sparkle and dash had gone out of her; she was hot and confused and dull, helpless with emotion.

She moved, the milk spilled. Gail stumbled against a chair, bumped her knee against the ice box, as she went to mop it up.

"I don't know what's the matter with me!" she muttered furiously.

To her tremendous relief Edith came downstairs at this moment, and Phil came in, both enthusiastic over the picnic. The conversation became general, and the puppy had a warm welcome. Eggs went on to boil, were placed where the cold water could drip on them in the sink. One knife got buttery, another jammy; Edith brought bacon and a long knife to Dick, mutely inviting him to slice the meat.

"Did you get any oiled paper at the five-and-ten, Gail?"

"I did."

"You're wonderful!" Edith said. Gail wished that she could believe it. To herself she felt hopelessly dull. Everything she said seemed forced and affected, and whenever Dick spoke to her she answered first with a laugh.

"Taste it, Phil. Isn't it delicious?" Edith said, extending a jam spoon.

"What the deuce is it? Plum?"

"Plum, apple, and one large, gnarled, fuzzy, superfluous quince!" Gail explained, suddenly herself again. The others laughed. She was standing on a chair as she spoke, in the gloom of the enormous, old-fashioned closet, reaching up for the picnic basket. Her eyes blazed like two blue stars between the thick fringe of dark lashes, the big teeth shone white between her parted lips. Edith thought she had never seen Gail look so pretty.

"Quinces *are* fuzzy," Dick agreed with his slow smile.

"It was banging around this kitchen for days. I didn't know what to do with it," Gail said, busily lining the basket now with newspapers. Dick came to stand beside her, the wrapped packages of coffee and sugar in his big hands, and she trembled and dared not look up.

They went up to the old dam, in the sweetness of the autumn afternoon, and built their picnic supper fire on the sunshiny shingle, where Cabin River widened to stream in and join the broad expanse of tranquil water above the old wooden bulkhead. There were no swings and slides, no popcorn and candy at the dam: it was not a popular picnic place. To-night the Lawrences had it to themselves.

Behind them rose the soft blue gloom of the mountain ranges, rising against the eastern sky. Below lay the tawny folds of the hills, dotted with strips of woodland, and checkered neatly by orchards and vineyards.

The dam spanned a little canyon that was loosely wooded with oak and bay, sturdy red-trunked madrone trees and buckeye and cottonwood. Between these grew the beautiful wild huckleberry bushes, willows and hazel nuts, mountain lilac and manzanita, and at the top of the little ravine stood a solemn group of great redwoods, lifting warm brown shafts and feathery layers of foliage high against the back-drop of the hills beyond.

There were patches of slippery dry brown grass between the trees, and one famous tangle of blackberry vines, savage and menacing, but loaded all summer long with delicious fruit. Here and there strips of aged fencing, survivors from the old days of the Spanish ranches, emerged from the undergrowth, tipsy broken lines of weather-beaten pickets, soon to disappear into the dry bushes again.

The creek spread itself over rocks and formed deep pools just before joining the dam. In earlier years the Lawrences had always liked to play with this creek, clearing and changing its lazy course through the meadow. Even now they were not above an hour or two of breathless, splashing, utterly futile exertion along its picturesque course, tugging at rocks, panting, slipping into the sun-warmed shallows.

The air was sweet with wild grapes, tarweed, and crushed grass to-night; the scent of boiling coffee mingled with the other good odors in the hot sunset stillness. Gnats spun deliriously in thick shafts of light, trout plopped in the deep water of the dam. Phil sat silent, utterly content, watching a fish line, his handsome, thick Lawrence brows drawn together as he pondered something that was far away from fishing. Ariel and Van Murchison were on the shingle. Ariel was half sitting against a great log that was rooted deep in fine sand; her slim little legs and white tennis shoes were stretched out straight in front of her. Van was so close that his head almost touched her elbow;

he was lying on his side, looking up at her as he talked.

Sam not being at home when the picnic expedition had started, a note had been left for him, pinned to the kitchen door. Van, arriving before Sam, had calmly read the note, and had sat down on the Lawrences' kitchen doorstep to await Sam's return. After which they had followed the others in Van's car, a circumstance that added the last touch of felicity to the occasion for Gail. She remembered her old efforts to attract Van, a few months ago, the sallies of wit, the constant attempt to amuse him.

Ariel made no such efforts—not she! She simply *was,* and Van trailed her helplessly, irresistibly. When Ariel went down to walk across the old boards of the dam, Van followed. When she came back, and idly began to build a little pebbly pen for the velvet-brown, yellow-bellied water dogs, Van became her enthusiastic aide. Ariel, Gail noted, did not speak much; she never did. Van did all the chattering, Ariel only occasionally raising her eyes, scowling a little, smiling a little.

Meanwhile Dick lay on a patch of brown grass, his cap pulled over his eyes, his big chest rising and falling regularly in sleep, and Sam, Edith, and Gail completed the supper preparations. The little fire burned hotly in the windless air; long shafts of sunset were striking level upon the water now; the dam was a sheet of blue satin, twinkling in the light, and slipping into exquisite jade and ultramarine shadows against the overhanging banks.

And this was the night that Phil actually got a trout—quite a big one—and the night they saw a rattler, and the night they picked the hazel nuts.

"Oh, we do have fun!" Edith commented luxuriously, lying on the flat hot stones as the meal finished, watching the last light die away from the upper branches of the trees.

"Gail could picnic on the Statue of Liberty!" Sam said.

"Coffee, Phil?"

"Oh, help, no! I am bursting."

"A rumbling report, with a sharp detonation, will be me exploding," Van said.

"When I am an old, old man," Dick commented, lighting his old pipe, "I shall remember the broiled fish."

"Dick, have just this last spoonful!"

"Cease, girl. I've had chocolate cake since then."

"Well, you didn't have much!" Gail muttered. For indeed she had had to divide a scanty quarter-cake among them all.

" 'They said there could be no East Wind,' " Edith's voice began steadily. " 'They said there could be no East Wind where Somebody was. They said that wherever Dame Durden went, there was sunshine and summer air!' "

Her fingers gripped Gail's, and they smiled at each other.

"Gee, here's a pip!" Sam said, without preamble. He took a book of poems from his pocket. " 'Member Lindsay, that Ede's so crazy about?" he asked them. " 'Member the one about General Booth she read us? Say, this is another of his, about Legree."

He read it. They made him read it again. Phil took the book to turn the pages further and find "The Congo."

"That's my idea of poetry," Dick said. "I don't read much. It doesn't attract me, somehow!"

"Still read Shakespeare every night, Dick?" This was Gail, very casually. It seemed odd to her, when for years she had known Dick intimately, that she should get her first real sense of talking to him, of appreciating him, only now.

"Oh, a good deal. I want words, you know—the use of words," he answered.

"A lot of good Shakespearian words will do you arguing cases, Dick!" Phil commented.

"I can hear Dick in a murder trial cajoling the judge," Edith said with a giggle. " 'Prithee, coz, be not so stern in your necessity. If that this poltroon trembling at the bar——' " She stopped; they all laughed.

" 'Nay, sweet my chuck, be merry!' " Gail added. "That's what Dick will say to them as he leads them to the electric chair. 'Let thine executors be still my friends,' " she improvised, " 'that when thy clay shall mute and earless lie, my claims against thy purse and thy estate shall all be satisfied, thine heirs shall pay to the last stiver what thou owest me!' "

"Gail, are you making that up?"

This was Dick, half amazed, half scandalized. Gail's heart soared.

"Of course she is," Phil answered. "She can do Shakespeare by the yard!"

"Oh, well, not quite," Gail disclaimed it modestly. "No," she added, "Shakespeare had something that I haven't exactly got the trick of, yet. I mean," she went on, in a gale of what Edith used to call "idiot" laughter, "I mean that I could do the big parts—Macbeth or Othello. Anyone could! But it's those little parts, just casual servants and soldiers and messengers—they're the ones that stick me. I mean——"

There was an expectant silence in the group that was resting on the shingle in the dusk. A great owl floated low over the dam, and was gone; the creek rippled, rippled in the pause.

"I mean—oh, well, like those pages that are always coming in to walk across a very shallow stage—while they're changing scenes," she said. "Men in hired costumes a size too big for them. The ones that rattle off something like, 'Knew you, my lord, that doubly importuned by love and war, twin sisters strangely got, in that dark hour when Venus 'countered Mars, the duke, that hath nor slept nor spake of late, save on the subject of his enemies, hath so contrived that by the seeming truce betwixt our camps he craftily shall feign——'

"You know what I mean?" she interrupted herself, out of breath.

"Gail, you weren't making that up?"

"Of course she was! You've heard her do that before, Dick."

"It's the darnedest thing I ever heard!" Dick muttered.

"It sounds much smarter than it is. Anyone can do it!" Gail said.

"However," said the lawyer, returning to the point after awhile in true legal style, "I shall never take criminal cases."

"What will you take then?"

"Corporation stuff. International stuff."

Gail reflected again that it was strange that she had never given much attention to Dick's ambitions before.

Clearing away all signs of the picnic in the fast-gathering dusk, she tried an experiment. Upon Dick's carrying off the coffee pot to throw the grounds away behind the trees, she rewarded him with a casual "Thank you, dear!" said in just the tone she used to Sam and Phil. Later she said again, "Take that, will you, dear?"

She couldn't remember whether she had ever called Dick "dear" before. If she had, it had not meant anything. Probably she had, for it seemed to make not the slightest impression on him to-night. If he had looked surprised she had planned to laugh quite naturally and say, "I thought I was talking to Sam!"

But there was no necessity for this explanation. Dick paid no attention to the affectionate monosyllable. Oblivious old Dick, she thought, who never dreamed that close beside him was a woman who was thrilling with love and happiness and the need for him in this wonderful hour of autumn warmth and moonshine!

They walked, singing, down the steep, rutty half mile to the cars; the moon rose and spotted the trail with silver and black. Gail needed a hand now; the hand that gripped her own was Dick's. She marveled that he could not feel the electric current that ran through the tips of the square, firm fingers.

Afterward she always remembered the night they went up to the dam, and saw the rattlesnake, and caught the fish. A hot night of moonshine and laughter and talk on the shingle above the dam.

CHAPTER XVII

FOR soon the weather changed and autumn came in, with October, in earnest. The leaves began to fall now, and the winds to blow. Fog came up from the bay at night, and Clippersville mourned under wet trees and gray skies. There had never been such a cold October, such a wet November.

To Gail it was a thrilling time, this autumn filled with hints of change, of endings and beginnings. She was in love, and it was entirely different from what she had expected it to be. Far from giggles, rapture and excitement, it was a serious business; it made her feel grown up and responsible.

She could never love anyone else but Dick; it was all settled. Everything she thought now had to have him in it; the future had narrowed itself down to just Dick.

He had no money, he was country-bred, he was only the son of the people who rented the old Lawrence place over in Stanislaus—it did not matter. Gail, who had always felt that Clippersville limited and bound her, knew herself quite willing—ah, breathlessly willing!—to live contentedly in Clippersville forever, or out on the Stanislaus ranch forever, if Dick so decreed. What Ariel or Edith would think of this sudden altering of all her dreams was nothing; there was nothing anywhere, there was nobody anywhere, except Dick!

All life was a miracle now, and she walked in the glory of it like somebody lifted above the earth. The old library was different, the tree-roofed streets through which she walked were enchanted, the family group grew more deeply, more perilously dear every day.

All the happy old customs that she and Edith had known for years were touched with new joy and new pain. Their "quakering" the kitchen, their buying a vase or a few flowers or new towels on the third of every month for the old house's "birthday," their lunches at the kitchen table were poignantly sweet now. When Dick joined the family circle the air was only a little more electrified than when he did not come.

And meanwhile Van had established a more comfortable footing in the old Lawrence house than ever before, and while he and Ariel did not seem to be exactly flirting—exactly having an affair—there was a far more substantial base to their relationship than his friendship with Gail had ever known. Very quietly, in an almost bored tone, Ariel told her sisters in early November that Van was going East to get to work.

"No more college?"

"No; he wants to get into the business. His father says he'll start him in the New Jersey plant."

"Then he won't come back to Clippersville?"

"Yes. He's going to be back for a week in January. That's—that's month after next."

"He's coming back after her!" Edith said, when she and Gail were alone.

"Oh, Ede, it does look like it!"

"It seems to me perfectly unmistakable."

"She's so quiet about it—so placid."

"She always has been."

Gail's imagination was off at full speed again: Ariel married at eighteen to young Van Murchison; Edith and Phil and Sam living on here at the old house; herself and Dick . . .

But this last snatched at her breath. Herself and Dick. People in the library would glance at her: "She's engaged; she's going to marry that young lawyer, Richard Stebbins."

They might have a little house up toward the Plazita, one of the new Spanish houses, with the grilles and pink tiles and creamy walls. Or they might rent one of the sleepy little bay-windowed cottages down at the end of the Calle, a cottage with a picket fence and a garden crammed with fuchsias and marigolds and wallflowers. It didn't matter which.

Dick would have cases, and she would study every detail of every case and keep up with him. And she would have babies—babies tumbling about among the flowers. They would have a car, too, some day. It was a little hard to imagine them with a car, but everyone did get a car sooner or later.

Happiness, happiness, happiness—to be married to him, to have Dick all to herself! Tapioca puddings and tomato aspic for Dick. The miracle of marriage, the amazing flaming glory of it, surrounded her with a cloud of mist by day and of fire by night.

It began to seem as if things were happening in Clippersville, after all. The sluggish current of Gail's life was stirred in many ways. It was not only that Phil got a raise, and that Van Murchison might marry Ariel. Sam was working for a scholarship, and might actually win a year at Columbia! Columbia University in New York. And Miss Foster got married, after having been engaged, it appeared, for eleven years to

Dr. Price, the jolly, fat, kindly dentist whose paralytic mother had taken a long time to die. All this was thrilling; it made for changes. Gail was assistant librarian now, with the name "Abigail Lawrence" printed in gold on the library windows and a salary of fifty-five dollars a month. Miss Foster had gotten sixty, but then she had been with the library for fifteen years.

And then Christmas was coming. Always exciting, it seemed doubly so this year. The shortening days, the crisp bright mornings sparkling with frost, the crackle of the evening fire—all seemed to belong to Gail in some special sense, seemed full of a significance and beauty that she had never found in them before. She fairly danced to work in the mornings, and Edith would come home in the darkness of five o'clock to hear Gail singing over dinner preparations in the kitchen.

Dick was boarding with them now, for his mother had gone to Oregon to stay with a daughter newly widowed, and there were only men on the Stanislaus ranch. Sometimes when Edith came home Dick would be there, talking, papers or a law book open before him. Gail, flushed and lovely in her dark blue kitchen apron, her tawny mop a little mussed, her eyes dancing, would be questioning him animatedly over her muffin tins or steaming pots.

There was one cloud in the sky this winter, to be sure. Gail and Edith acknowledged its existence bravely one December evening when they asked Dick if he thought Phil really cared for Lily Cass.

"That's a hard question to answer," Dick said, with a faint frown and a sigh.

"Do you like her, Dick?"

"Well—she's not my type. But she's an awfully sweet little thing, really."

"Is she divorced, Dick?"

"No. But there's talk of it. She hasn't seen Joe for two years."

"And if she were, do you believe Phil really would marry her?"

Another pause. Then Dick asked slowly, "Would you girls care?"

"You've answered!" Gail said, with a brief, mirthless laugh.

"I suppose I have." Dick sighed again. "There—there never was anything wrong with Lily," he offered, doubtfully.

"No!" Gail agreed forcefully. "Except that she was as common as fruit flies, and ran with that terrible box-factory gang, and chewed gum in church, and talked way up in G major."

This rather finished Lily's case for the moment. But a little later Gail said apologetically, "I don't know why I got so wild about poor Lily. She certainly is having a rather tough time of it."

"I'll tell you!" Dick said eagerly. "Phil's the quiet sort. He loves Clippersville; he wouldn't change places with the President. He's more interested in the new bridge than in international events; he thinks the Calle is the most important business street in California. All Phil cares about is that this town is prosperous. Why, he was talking about our traffic cops the other night as if no other place in the world had six traffic cops! Phil wants to stay here and develop the place, and he loves Lily—or *if* he loves her——" Dick floundered, turning red, and correcting himself hastily.

"We know he loves her; you needn't be so scrupulous!" Gail said with a dry little laugh. "I believe you'd stand up for Phil if he went out some night and cut somebody's throat!"

But she loved Dick for his loyalty none the less, and curried the mutton stew with one idea in her mind, "They all *eat* it, and he loves it curried!"

There was to be a turkey this Christmas; an enormous one from the ranch, with Dick Stebbins's compliments. There were also to be two mammoth mince pies Sam won in a raffle at Dobbins'. Gail was in a very glory of planning for several days before the feast. She began her list on the eighteenth: "Celery, two bunches; cranberries, two quarts . . ."

Christmas falling on a Tuesday, they all went up to the woods on the Saturday afternoon preceding it, and came back laden with evergreen, scarlet toyon berries, crisp, polished huckleberry branches, and the one great bunch of mistletoe that Dick climbed high into a dying oak to secure.

Rosy, cold, muddy, breathless, they scattered their greens about the old house, staining their fingers, strewing leaves on the dark stairs, scenting the cold hallways and the dining room with Christmas green.

Gail, frantic to start tying bundles and mixing batters, had to spend the wet Monday in the library. She walked up to Müller's at five o'clock, not only to wait for Edith but to help her effectually while she was waiting. Edith was in an exhausted whirl of last Christmas sales; Ariel also was there as one of her Christmas assistants, at two dollars a day.

Lights were blazing in Müller's, aisles were packed with a slowly moving river of women who turned out of the current to stop at the jewelry counter, the leather goods, the laces. Ariel shuffled book jackets underfoot as she rushed to and fro; her cheeks were blazing, her eyes wild.

"Darling, put that in the Rush bin, and see if you can find another of the 'Christmas-time Is Angel Time' booklets, and get hold of Mr. Kelly, and ask him if the customer pays a quarter can we deliver out at Bowman's Park to-morrow!" Edith said, with the special squeeze and smile she always had for her sister. "If we have it, it's on the counter, Mrs. Price," she said to a customer. "That's two dollars, madam. That's three dollars, madam. I couldn't promise you a fresh copy now. I couldn't promise you a Christmas Day delivery as far away as Moultrie. Is this to be a charge? Yes, madam, two Christmas deliveries.

"But I love it, it's so Christmassy!" Edith said in an aside as the clock began to approach six and the blessed signs of closing made themselves manifest at last.

The staff at Müller's began to drape lengths of white cotton over the tables and counters; rain was twinkling and sparkling in the black night as the Lawrences came wearily, excitedly out and started for home. Ariel was very silent.

But Gail and Edith were gay. Christmas Eve, at library and shop, was over, and nothing but fun and holiday ahead. Their words tumbled over each other; their thoughts were busy with additional surprises and plans.

Edith thought of the tissue paper and ribbons in her lower bureau drawer. She would begin wrapping and marking packages right after dinner; she had completely ruined herself on presents, as usual, and she felt the usual joy in her plight. She mentally reviewed the set of buttons and links for Gail's kitchen linens, the books, the stockings, the Dedham bowl with the turkeys on it, the new writing paper that she had gotten at a bargain when Müller's stock was stained but not injured by fire last September.

Then there were lots of little packages that she had bought at different times and half forgotten. Whenever Müller's had had an employees' sale Edith had taken advantage of it. Handkerchiefs, purses, belts, towels, buckles, chains—there they all were. It would be fun to sort them all out, wrap them, arrange them, to-night.

Gail thought of presents, too. She wondered if Dick would give her a present—of course he would! She would not care what it was; it would be the most valued thing she received. Dick needed socks and ties and belts and gloves—if he went to Los Angeles next week he would need gloves—but she had dared give him none of these. Books. She had two books for him. In one, with a fast-beating heart, she had written, "Dick, with love from A. L." Love. Love from Abigail Lawrence for Dick Stebbins!

"Perhaps we'll be married by next Christmas!" thought Gail, running, racing, hurrying home in the black, rainy darkness of Christmas Eve.

She thought also of her big yellow bowl of stale bread crumbs, and hoped her turkey would come out well to-morrow. Fruit cup first, just for formality's sake, just so that they should not fall upon the roast meat like cavemen. But there was no use annoying the family with soup. When they had had their fruit cup they would want their turkey—plates of it, with gravy, potato, onions, squash, hot bakery rolls, rough cranberry sauce and smooth cranberry sauce.

And afterward, the pies. No fuss nor feathers. And only the six of them—"the family." Dick was almost family now.

It seemed to her the most wonderful Christmas they had ever had. From the hour on Christmas Eve when she, Ariel, and Edith got home wet, cold, and tired to the warm kitchen and to planning and laughter and tea, toast, and jam and wrapping gifts and surprises, until the two o'clock dinner on Christmas Day was safely served, there was not a flaw.

They got all their presents ready and at eleven o'clock set the table for breakfast, then walked under warm shining stars to church at midnight. Everyone stumbled back utterly exhausted, to go to bed heavily and blindly, fingers sore from strings and tinsel, backs and feet aching, hands scented with pine resin, hearts filled with happiness.

And then it was Christmas morning, and everyone was thanking everyone else, and Gail was honestly amazed at all the things they got—and such beautiful things. The Lawrences did not hang up their stockings any more, but each member of the family, and this year Dick too, had a table near the fireplace. These tables were loaded with boxes and bundles. Gail saw Dick's handwriting on a long thin box at the bottom of her exciting stack, and she opened that last, spinning out the expectation.

An umbrella, with a little square "G. L." cut on the gold top.

He gave Edith the same thing, only with a silver mount, and Ariel a camera. Everybody got everything; there was no end to the gifts, nor to the tissue paper and ribbons that rained on the floor for somebody always to gather up and heap on the fire.

Breakfast, leisurely and late, was wonderful, and by eleven o'clock the scents of the early afternoon meal were in the spicy, warm Christmas-scented air. Dick was leaving for Los Angeles at seven; Ariel had promised Miss Lizzie Vail, with whom she had been studying dramatic expression, to have supper with Lizzie and her mother.

"But come home early, darling, for to-morrow's your birthday, and we have to celebrate all over again!"

Thus Gail, as she flew about the kitchen in the full glory of dinner-getting.

"Oh, I will, Gail." Ariel was very docile. She seemed to her sisters to be at her sweetest to-day. She sat chopping giblets dutifully, her beautiful hazel eyes fixed dreamily on the knife that moved up and down in her fingers.

Van had sent her no present that they knew of. But Christmas mails were always late. Phil and Dick walked down to the post office at noon, returning laden with cards and small packages. But if Van had sent either to her, Ariel gave no sign.

At two they sat down, ravenous, to the feast. Everything was perfection; even Gail had never cooked a turkey like this one before. The cranberry, the gravy, the roast itself, with its crisp hot buttery outside and its white tender dampness within—they could not say enough for the cook and the food. Long after three o'clock the sextette lingered at the table, nibbling raisins and nuts, trying the German honey cakes that had come as a greeting that morning, sampling the Christmas candy.

And when finally there was a stir, it was only after an unanimous decision to abandon all plans for supper. Phil went off to some point unknown—probably to see

Lily—Sam helped clear the table, Dick had to walk down to his office to get some papers, and Ariel herself suggested that she walk with him because she had a present for Mary Binney, and could leave it by the way.

"But please leave the silver and glasses for me to wash—*please,*" Ariel pleaded.

"Oh, nonsense!" Gail said. She and Edith made short work of the clearing up. The kitchen was in order in no time at all, and they went for a Christmas round of calls together in the cold still afternoon, thanking persons for greetings, looking at other trees and presents, filled with a general sense of holiday well-being and happy weariness.

"And now let's go back," said Gail, "and rest, and read some of our new books!"

And as this was a regular Christmas proceeding, too, the short day ended with them both stretched luxuriously on Gail's bed, reading at intervals, talking desultorily, waiting for night to bring the other members of the family home.

"How long will Dick be in Los Angeles, Gail?"

"Only about two weeks. It's a ship case. A great chance for him."

"I think he's such a dear. I've grown awfully fond of him this fall," said Edith.

"He's a darling."

Ariel put her head in the door.

"I've been asleep," she said, blinking.

"We looked in and saw you when we came in."

"I'm going to Miss Vail's now," said Ariel, who was hatted and coated and gloved. "I'll be back early."

"Dick will be gone when you come back!"

"I know it. I said good-bye to him." Ariel looked very pretty in her dark blue coat and snug blue hat. She came in, kissed Gail, kissed Edith. "I don't want to go!" she said, with a weary sigh.

"I hate to have you," Gail said affectionately.

"Think of being eighteen to-morrow, baby. Mother's poet, eighteen."

"Mother's nothing!" Ariel said bitterly.

"Poetry comes by fits and starts," Edith said sententiously. "Gail," she asked, when Ariel had gone, "did she get anything from Van?"

"Not that she told me."

"It might be delayed in the mail."

"A telegram wouldn't be."

"I know."

There was a silence in Gail's big, shabby, pretentiously furnished room, heated to-night by an unwonted fire in the grate.

"It's six o'clock, Ede. Are you going to eat anything—tea, or cold turkey, or anything?"

"Gail, don't mention food to me again for two days."

"I know. I feel like that." Gail roused herself, stiffly and drowsily. "I told Dick I'd start packing his bag for the trip," she said, with an exultant rise at her heart.

"Is he going to drive all the way?"

"No, only to San José. He takes the train there."

"We'll miss him."

"Oh, won't we!"

Edith yawned agonizingly. Gail crossed the hall to Dick's cold big barrack of a room to find him done with his packing and ready for good-byes. He looked almost handsome—or at all events Gail found the lean, big-featured face handsome—as he belted his coat and pulled on the new gloves that Edith had not been too self-conscious to give him, if Gail had.

"You're worrying about this case!" Edith accused him. For he seemed unusually grave.

"No. Yes, I'm kind of worried," Dick said.

"Ariel's gone to the Vails', Dick, and Phil isn't back. Sam!" Gail called. "Come out and say good-bye to Dick."

"I'll only be gone two weeks, or maybe three," Dick said, with a curiously abstracted, almost an anxious look.

"I think we ought to kiss him good-bye on Christmas night!" Edith said giddily, in a rare mood of daring.

For answer his big coated arm went about her, and he kissed her so heartily that she emerged breathless and protesting. Then it was Gail's turn.

The clean-shaven hard cheek was against her own, his tremendous grip lifted her, held her shoulders tight; she felt weak, helpless, she drank the deliciousness of that first kiss as if it were a draught of heady wine. For an instant she was his, dazzled and ecstatic. Then panting, laughing, she was squarely on her feet again, still close to him.

"Well, *Edith!* The next time you have a bright idea you might take Dick and me into your counsels!"

"Don't worry—about anything that comes up, Gail," Dick was saying, rather confused and breathless himself, very big, very much the man. "I'll be back in a few days. Everything will come out all right!"

He was gone. They heard the engine start in the yard, and laughed at each other as they wandered down to the kitchen.

"Allow me to be the first to congratulate you on your exquisite manners, Miss Edith Lawrence!"

"Well, I don't care!" said Edith, unashamed. "His mother isn't here, he's all alone, and such a darling!"

Edith and Sam had tea and cold turkey after all. But Gail, although she sat with them at the table, was feeding on finer food, and could not touch their tangible viands. Her mouth, her whole being, still pulsated to Dick's grave, hard, definite kiss. How he had kissed her!

Phil came in at nine, and they all talked idly until the clock amazed them by striking ten. Then everyone was up at once, and Gail went to the telephone. If Ariel was as late as this, Phil must go get her. Poor Phil, who looked so tired!

"Let me run upstairs, Gail," Edith pleaded, "and see if she hasn't slipped in and gone to bed! She *can't* be at the Vails' this late."

"She's there if old man Vail has gotten started on the Civil War," Sam muttered.

They were still laughing at his tone when Edith came downstairs with a letter in her hand, and a whitened face.

"It was on her pillow, Gail."

"What!" Gail whispered. Without moving her eyes from Edith's, she tore open the sealed envelope.

"She's gone!" Phil said.

"Eloped with Van!" Sam suggested.

"Read it," Gail whispered, handing the written sheet to Phil.

Phil read it slowly, aloud:

"Gail dearest, and all of you: Forgive us. We had to do it this way for reasons we'll write you.

"It's always been Dick, Gail. I think Ede knew, months ago. Knew how I felt anyway. But I never knew how he felt until lately.

"We're going to Los Angeles, and we'll be married there. I couldn't stand the gossip at home, and having no money for clothes or anything.

"I've told everyone that I have an aunt down South—it's true—and that I'm going to try to get into the movies.

"*Please* tell everyone that. At least until we're married, Gail. If there is any hitch, I never can come back. But there won't be. Dick says there won't be. We'll write you everything, and where we are, and everything.

"Don't tell anyone—don't tell *anyone,* Gail. Just tell them I'm trying to get a job in the movies, and let it go at that. If I don't make good, Dick'll bring me home.

"Expect a telegram to-morrow. I do love you, Gail, and I'm sorry."

It was signed, "Ariel."

"My God! Dick Stebbins!" Phil said, in a long silence.

"Gail, don't look so!" Edith said trembling, crying. "She's safe with Dick! Maybe—maybe it's the best thing that could have happened!"

Gail moved her lips as if she were about to speak, swallowed, shook her head. She got up and went to the sink and took a glass of water, her back turned toward the room.

When she turned about her face seemed oddly changed. It was white, it was older, somehow, and infinitely weary. Her hand wet with the cold water, she brushed her hair feverishly from her forehead; her lips were wet with water, too, as she spoke.

"Well," she said quietly, in a conversational tone, her heavy brows knitted in a faint frown. "Well, that's that. Isn't it? That's *that.*"

CHAPTER XVIII

EDITH and Gail had the Wilcox cottage at Carmel for two dreamy August weeks, easily managing to stay under their table allowance of ten dollars a week, and reveling in the atmosphere of pines, sea air, golden dunes, and charming, friendly, informal neighbors.

They did their marketing in the rambling little main street every morning, laughing and gossiping as they wandered to and fro under the fragrant scented trees along the plank sidewalks that were eternally menaced by drifting sand. Afterward they finished the play housekeeping that was all the Wilcox cabin demanded, and took a picnic lunch and the inevitable books down to the shore.

And here, on the sun-warmed rocks, they idled for hours, dreaming, reading, talking, dozing. The sea crept in to their feet, and fretted itself into lace over the sharp stones; its deep surging rush and boom was the undertone to all the other noises of the world—gulls' shrill piping, their own voices.

Sometimes they carried their books a few hundred feet up through the dunes, and left them with a kind little old lady—but then everyone in Carmel was kind to the Lawrence girls!—until the next day. Then they were free to wander up home the long way, past the Mission, along the willows and cottonwoods of the shallow river where the cattle grazed, through the woods.

Or sometimes, after going straight home, for Edith to put on her pink linen and Gail her striped pongee, they went out to tea with some artist or musician or dancer or writer—Carmel abounded in these interesting folk, who found Gail and Edith interesting in their turn.

And often at night there was something to do in the community theater, or a terrace supper of salad and fruit in the house of some girls like themselves, with moonlight and good talk to follow. Young teachers, girl doctors, scientists, all the world of young eager working womanhood went to Carmel for vacation days, and lived on peaches, strawberries, tomatoes, and wholewheat bread, just as the Lawrences did.

These were peaceful days—definitely happy days.

"I feel as if I had gotten my soul back again," Gail said.

"It's done everything a vacation ought to do!" Edith agreed contentedly.

"And somehow, now, we can go on, Ede," the older sister added soberly.

"I know. Everything last year was—oh, horrid!" Edith mused aloud.

"I never thought, somehow——" Gail flung a bit of their last picnic sandwiches at an inquiring gull, watched it pounce and wheel. "I never saw myself, somehow, at twenty-six, contented to be a Clippersville old maid," she said, as if half to herself, as if thinking aloud.

Edith was silent a minute.

"You don't have to be a Clippersville old maid, Gail," she said then, lightly, but with a touch of pain in her voice.

"I suppose not." Gail paused in her turn. "You mean Ollie Chase?" she asked indifferently.

"Ollie. Or Gregory. You could be Mrs. Gregory Own-Your-Own-Home-in-Westgate Gray," Edith said.

Gail mused on this, her heavy brows drawn.

"Somehow it doesn't click, Ede."

"Mary Rumbold told me you were the most popular girl in town, Gail."

Gail did not deny this either. She appeared to be pondering it.

"I presume, in a perfectly respectable way, I am," she admitted, without enthusiasm. "After the jazz age, the nicer type of man seems to look about for my sort of girl. 'I've had my fun with the petters,' he says; 'now I'll find some girl about whom there's never been a whisper.' "

"Ah, don't be bitter, dearest!" Edith said distressedly in the silence.

"I don't think I'm bitter, Ede. But somehow—well, it would have driven me out of my senses with joy, at twenty, to have two or three of Clippersville's rising young citizens want me. But now it just—doesn't click, that's all. I'm vaccinated."

"Was it Van, Gail?"

They had been to the edges of this ground before many, many times. But in the more than two years since that fatal Christmas night that had ended one phase of the Lawrences' life forever, Edith had not quite dared this much before.

"Yes, partly, I suppose," Gail now answered simply.

"You did care for him, Gail?"

"Oh, no; not that!" Gail laughed a little wearily, without much mirth. "No," she said thoughtfully. "He wasn't the sort of boy for whom one *cared*. But I rather went crazy that summer, Ede, and it's that that I hate to remember.

"It's that I blame myself for," she said, in a silence.

"Of course, you see these things differently, at twenty-six.

"I was sick of Clippersville and poverty and dish washing, and when Van came along I sort of lost my bearings. I thought you could force your—well, your fate. Grasp what you wanted. I did everything he wanted me to do, went about with those rich people although I knew all the time I didn't belong there, and that they didn't want me. And in the end, I had nothing to show for it."

"As if that wasn't natural enough, Gail, for a girl your age!"

"Oh, it was natural enough. But if I didn't have much sense at twenty-three, Ariel was only a baby at seventeen. She saw me discontented and reckless.

"It was half a joke with me. But it was deadly serious earnest with her. She wasn't going to be caught in the trap you and I were in—perfectly respectable, and not having any fun!"

"But then why," Edith said, thinking it all out, "why should she refuse Van?"

"You think she did?"

"Oh, Gail, what else? He was simply hanging around the house all that autumn—but her note said, 'It's always been Dick!'" Edith said animatedly.

"I know. But I always feel that it was because Van went off without making things definite, and didn't write, and didn't send any Christmas present, that Ariel suddenly turned to Dick—because he was *somebody,* and because he was going away."

"Dick wouldn't have stood for taking Van Murchison's leavings!"

"Dick mightn't have known."

"Yes," Edith conceded, after consideration, "that might have been it."

"But then—do you suppose she loves him now, Gail?" Edith demanded, after another silence.

"Oh, yes. When you're married to a person . . ."

Her own words carried Gail over that wearisome road her thoughts had beaten flat in the last thirty-odd months, and she could not go on. Jealousy and pain mingled together like suffocating fumes in her heart.

Ariel, Dick's wife. Ariel for more than two wonderful years Dick's wife—sharing his breakfasts, meeting him at the door at night, close in his arms when fires were lighted on winter evenings, and happy on the front seat of Dick's car when summer expeditions were afoot. It wasn't fair—it wasn't fair.

These agonies were routine now. She knew how long the spasm of sheer physical wretchedness would last, how long it would take her to return, sane and weary, to the routine of library and kitchen, Clippersville streets, and the company of old books again.

They were rarer than they had been, the hours of pain and rebellion, if not less sharp. She could bear them better than she once had borne them, only because she knew that they would not endure. The pain would ease; the other interests of her life flow in to fill the gaping river bed that love for Dick had once brimmed so richly.

From Dick there had come but one brief letter, received on the New Year's Day just one week after he and Ariel had gone away. Ariel was well, the letter had said, and they were to be married to-morrow. There had been delays because of residence, and other legalities; they would write full particulars in a day or so. Meanwhile, the family was please not to say anything about it. And he was as ever theirs affectionately, Dick.

And after that the long months had spun themselves to a year, to two years, to more, and there had come no other word. Clippersville was perfectly satisfied to hear that Ariel Lawrence was staying with an aunt, down Pasadena way, and working hard to get into the movies, and only occasionally remembered that Dick Stebbins had been offered a much better position somewhere and was making good. San Pedro, was it? Well, anyway, there was nothing to bring him back to the home town, with his father dead, his mother living with a widowed sister 'way up North, and the Stanislaus place rented to strangers.

So Clippersville dismissed Ariel and Dick as separately solved problems; Edith and Phil philosophized about having the difficult youngest member of the family settled, and it was only in Gail's heart that the pain and the sense of loss lived on.

Yet spring came back, and there were new frocks and new hats, and the house had birthdays, and Edith, Phil, Sam, and Gail took whatever young men were available, and picnicked on summer evenings up by the old dam again. And sometimes, under the evening lamp, Gail remembered things about the Sicilian vespers and the London plague and the Concord idealists, and fell into her old half-musing, half-conversational, wholly inconsequential monologues. Even the Formaldehydes returned, older and wiser, but still the same helpless crew, and Edith laughed again, and Phil laughed against his will, and Sam put his tawny head down on the table in mirth.

When Phil, only a few weeks before these happy holidays at Carmel, had told his sisters that some time this summer he was to be married to Lily Cass, widowed now, it was the usually quiet Edith who broke into tears, protest, and pleading, and the usually impetuous and proud Gail who said gently:

"If you love her, Phil, Ede and I wouldn't want anyone who—who loved anyone—really truly loved her—to be unhappy."

"Gail, you're so sweet!" Phil, taken unawares, and completely disarmed, had said gratefully.

"No; it's just that—just that I think any of us that *can* ought to be happy," Gail had faltered with filling eyes.

"So that's the next thing we have to face!" Edith had said when the sisters were alone.

"I suppose so."

"I'd like to know how he thinks we're going to manage financially!"

"Oh . . . Perhaps renting the corner to the gas-station people."

"Which we'll never do!" Edith had said hotly. She had hesitated, surprised at the expression on Gail's face, and had added, quickly, "You wouldn't, would you, Gail?"

"Well, we're getting more and more into the downtown streets, Ede. With the new post-office building right across the street and the Christian Science Church up on the old Mockbee lot, we're going to be forced out, some day. And a hundred a month is big money for that empty corner."

"But Gail, we'd have to take out the magnolia!"

"I know. It would ruin that end of the garden."

"It would ruin everything!"

"If Phil marries Lily," Gail had said, after a thoughtful interval, "I mean to act—well, with all the character—I mean with all the—well, philosophy I can scrape together. I'm going to act as if she wasn't Lily Wibser of Thomas Street Hill, but Phil's wife. Not the one we would have chosen, maybe——"

"Gail, you're so wonderful!" Edith had said passionately, as she paused. "I think you're the most wonderful woman alive!"

"I used to think I was unusual, Ede," Gail had said in a sudden humility. "I couldn't help it—the way things went at school, the literature prizes, the grades I skipped. But if I am, what has it gotten me?"

"Oh, Gail, you can't tell what's ahead! We don't know what's coming!"

"I know I'm twenty-six," Gail had said seriously.

CHAPTER XIX

THEY came home on a hot Saturday afternoon, wearied, sunburned, and content from their vacation at Carmel. During the slow train trip they read books, and planned.

"I may walk 'round to the library, at about four, to see how everything's been going."

"We'll unpack our bags, and see if Mrs. Cutts has any food in the house."

"We could stop at the delicatessen on the chance that she wouldn't have milk or butter."

They took a taxi, an unwonted extravagance, and carried their big bags through the dry, silent, summer garden and into the side door. The house was unlocked, silent, empty; it had withdrawn into that airy, shadowy peace that takes possession of shabby old houses, ordered and deserted, on hot afternoons. Outside its shaded, opened windows tree branches swayed in early afternoon wind. Inside there was a smell of scoured wood and carpets and roses, for against the western windows, the windows of the library and the best drawing room, roses had clambered and crowded for fifty long years, and their knotted heavy ropes were as thick as Gail's wrists.

"It's good to get home!" Gail said, luxuriously unpacking, undressing, bending her slender body double to brush her inverted fluffy mop.

"But I could live at Carmel forever!" Edith said.

And then suddenly there was Phil flying upstairs, and the thunderbolt of the news. Phil married! He and Lily married this morning, partly because Lily's house had burned down yesterday afternoon with all her clothes and all the children's clothes. And Phil only waiting his sisters' return to invite his wife and the three tiny stepsons into the Lawrence house for the time being, anyway, "until we can find some place . . ."

Lily helped Gail get supper that evening. Wolfe, Miles, and Daniel Cass played in the Lawrences' side yard, under the willow, where Phil and Gail, Edith, Sam, and Ariel had all played a few years ago, and their father before them.

Lily wore one of Ariel's old ginghams; she was the smallest of women, it fitted her well. Lily was nearly thirty; she knew little of books, art, culture, social fineness. But about other things—men, life, wifehood, motherhood—of course Lily knew a great deal. Between her and Gail, as they worked together, there rose a strange wall of silence. Their conversation became monosyllabic, careful, considerate.

"This bowl, huh?"

"Yes—that'll hold them."

"I wouldn'ta bounced in on you this way for the world. But Philip says you have plenty of room."

"Oh, we have rooms we never use. After supper we'll air some blankets down here."

Lily looked so familiar in Ariel's apron that Gail kept thinking it was Ariel back again. Gail was very gentle; she was conscious of an inner trembling. There was a jar, a shock in Phil's marriage, but it was a fact accomplished now, and Phil must not ever know how his sisters felt. She and Edith must just make the best of it—Lily and the children would not be under their roof for long, anyway.

"These knives?"

"Oh, Lily, don't you set the table! I'll——"

"Sure, I'll set it. It's you and me and Edith and Sam and Philip, is that right?"

"Well, and the children."

"Oh, they won't come to the table!" Lily said carelessly.

"No —the silver knives. They're in the sideboard."

Lily casually buttered some bread and spread it with jam. She filled three saucerless cups with milk, and gave her children their meal on the side porch. They seized the food with dirty little eager hands; panted like little puppies as they ate.

"Their hair still smells of smoke!" Lily said, superintending them with something of a mother dog's pats and pushes.

They were round, shaggy little fellows, with Celtic blue eyes and dark hair. Dan, the three-year-old, still retained a certain babyish uncertainty of outline, his wet little mouth hung open, his face, hair, hands were caked with dirt. His blue eyes were affectionate, hopeful. As he ate his supper he leaned comfortably against Gail's knee. Gail, peeling apples, found the feeling of the soft, warm, boneless little body rather disarming.

"Riff-raff," she said to him, "do you like marshmallows?"

"Oy do!" said Miles and Wolfe together, in hoarse, eager, deep voices.

"Well, when I finish these apples I'll give you each two—a pink and a white," Gail said.

She put Wolfe's and Miles's into their hands. But Dan's she batted gently against his nose first, so that the sticky, muddy expanse of his little honest, trusting face was powdered with white.

"Do you like my back yard to play in, Dan?"

Dan could not answer. He did not quite understand. But Miles and Wolfe shouted that Gee, dey liked it foine!

"They talk awful green," said Lily, half proud, half dubious.

She and Gail discussed various Clippersville families. Gail said that she thought Kane and Daisy Winters were as much in love with each other as ever, and that if they could back out of the divorce they would.

"I'll bet that's right," Lily conceded.

Lily was a great worker. The pans and dishes used in preparing dinner were clean and dry and put away again almost before Gail laid them down. Humbly, quickly, willingly, Lily did what she could.

But conversation at dinner was constrained. Edith, who had fabricated an important errand for herself, immediately upon hearing the news, came back late, and was white and nervous. Phil was blandly absorbed in trying to catch Lily's fingers, to meet her eyes with his fond look, to share with the family his mood of bliss. Everything was lovely, as far as Phil could see. Sam had been smitten dumb, and contributed nothing. Gail was glad when the queer meal was over and she could escape with Edith, to murmur cautiously in the kitchen while Phil and Lily shepherded the little boys upstairs.

"Gail, have we anything Dan could use for a nightgown? The other two are using mine, and I don't seem to have any more."

"Phil, I was thinking," Gail said steadily, gently. "It's Saturday night, and Müller's will be open until ten. You and Lily really ought to walk down there and get the boys coveralls and nightgowns, and get Lily a hat."

There was more of this. Presently, rather awkwardly and shyly, Phil kissed her.

"You're awfully decent about this, Gail."

"It doesn't mean that I feel especially cheerful, Phil," she couldn't help saying, suddenly pressed beyond bearing.

"Why not?" he asked, with the amazement of the man in love.

Gail was sorry she had said so much when she saw the change in his face. She had a second in which to wish that she had sense enough sometimes to keep her mouth shut, before she was carried on passionately, reluctantly.

"Well—Edith and I aren't exactly *rejoicing,* Phil."

"Oh, how do you *get* that way!" the usually gentle and good-natured Phil said impatiently.

The girl was silent, shaken to the soul, afraid to trust her voice.

"A wonderful welcome to my wife!" Phil said bitterly. There was a terrible moment of silence among the three eldest Lawrences, before Phil flung out of the kitchen. They heard him talking in the dining room, to Lily, a few minutes later, and Lily's soothing murmur and their laughter together.

"He told her," Edith murmured, aghast at the disloyalty.

"Oh, he'll tell her everything now!" Gail agreed, her heart aching with jealousy and loss.

They worked on silently for awhile, finished the complete ordering of the kitchen, tears in Edith's eyes and a stubborn, angry line hardening Gail's mouth.

Carefully they put away the last cup, wiped the sink, spread the dish towels on the line, shook the mop.

The big house seemed very silent to-night. The three little boys were sound asleep upstairs, sprawled out luxuriously in the handsome old Lawrence beds; Sam was reading in bed.

Gail went in, in wrapper and slippers, at ten o'clock, to kiss Sam and sit for a moment on the edge of his bed. She felt closer to this little brother, now that the big one had seemed to fail her, than ever before in her life. But she said nothing.

She carried an armful of books in to her room, established herself reading comfortably in bed. Phil and Lily had not come in yet. Her thoughts wandered from the page beneath her eyes, and stopped in Phil's big room, across the hall. Gail had gone in there with towels and soap and fresh pillow slips before dinner, and had seen Lily's white summer shoes with the black curlicues tumbled casually against the corner wall, and Phil's military brushes tangled with Lily's dark hair.

"Ugh!" she said aloud, making a face. And immediately she turned off her light, determined to get to sleep.

The long day reviewed itself. She was awakening again, with Edith, in the little Wilcox cottage in Carmel. They were chattering as they put it in order, as they rushed out to get a last look at the sea.

They were dragging home in the hot, crowded Saturday train, changing cars, climbing down at Clippersville Station to look for a taxi.

And then Phil—Phil—who had always been her standby, her bulwark and refuge, had come rushing in with his news, and slim, silly, superficial Lily was helping get supper in the kitchen, and three very small boys—Joe Cass's boys!—were tumbling and scrambling like three little land crabs under the shabby, overgrown trees in the Lawrence garden.

Sordid, horrible, humiliating. Gail turned on her face, and began to cry despairingly in the dark.

After that it seemed utterly unnatural for life to go on in its old grooves—the old grooves that were so incredibly the new.

To dress and breakfast and walk to work with Edith every morning, leaving Lily Cass pretty and complacent in the home kitchen, simply was not a possible situation. Gail felt disturbed and nervous, she began to hate to go home. When Lily discussed dinner plans with her she came to feel only a desire to scream that she did not want any dinner; just to watch Lily opening a can of tomatoes, or buttering a pudding dish, was to feel shaken from head to foot.

Even Edith, whose main effort was to preserve peace in these troubled days, found Lily's self-satisfied young wifehood trying beyond bearing. She and Gail used to glance levelly, patiently at each other, when Phil and Lily held each other's hands at the table, or exchanged love terms in low, significant tones.

Phil saw nothing of his sisters' attitude; he was in a seventh heaven of happiness. But Lily saw enough to convince her of Gail's and Edith's contempt and dislike, and, having the whip hand, took her revenge in a hundred little ways quite invisible and unimaginable to Phil.

"We can't stand it!" Gail said to Edith, lunching with her at the Woman's Exchange.

"Well, why don't they find a house?"

"Oh, I don't believe they're even looking!"

"Why should they? They're perfectly comfortable, and you and I do all the dinner dishes!"

"Has Phil gone crazy?" Gail would ask gloomily. "What does he think we *are*, to put up with it?"

"You know what she said, after that very first night. Remember when she came down to the library and said, 'Phil and I intend to get out of here at the first possible moment'?"

"I remember. But then she told Sam yesterday that the house was as much Phil's as ours."

"Well, it isn't!" Edith said stubbornly and fiercely.

"I suppose it is." And Gail would shut her lips in that new, firm line, and knit her thick Lawrence brows until they almost met.

"What can we *do*, Gail? We can't go on like this."

"I don't know what we can do," Gail would ponder darkly. "No use in the world appealing to Phil!" she said more than once.

"Oh, no use at all."

"He told me that the cheapest place he could move to, with the three children—and I dare say another coming——"

"Oh, Gail, no!"

"Well, I wouldn't be one bit surprised. He told me that the only decent places he could find were sixty and seventy-five, and that he simply couldn't pay it. They ran up a bill of more than two hundred at Müller's, you know, when Lily's clothes were all burned up."

"I know. Invisible stockings and fourteen-dollar hats!" Edith said in the pause.

"And now that Joe Cass is dead and Lily getting nothing from her people, I suppose Phil can't afford it. We never had any too much, as it was, and Phil's simply added four more persons to the list."

"You'd think," said Edith in patient scorn, "that Phil might have seen that coming!"

"I try—I really do try to be decent to Lily," Gail said after awhile. "I try to think up things that will interest her, and be reasonable when she's helping me in the kitchen. But when I hear a thing like her telling Sam that Phil has as much right in the house as we have . . ."

Another silence. Then Gail added, very low, "Something rises up in my very soul, and I feel that I could murder her!"

"I wish we could get away, Gail, you and I."

"Oh, I mean to!"

"If we could live in Carmel!"

"I know. And if we rented the corner for a gas station, and you and I had that, we *could* live there."

"Then that reconciles me to the gas station!" Edith said, fervently.

"I suppose," Gail summarized it all somberly, "the only decent thing—the only square thing—is to make the best of it. It's one of those things that would be so darned easy—so picturesque in a book. And it's—so hard——"

The voice that to Edith was always brave and gallant faltered a little, but Gail wanted no sympathy. There was a scowl between her eyes, a gruffness in her aspect that repudiated it.

"This effort to make the best of it won't get us anywhere," she said.

Yet Edith was quite keen enough to notice the courage with which Gail carried the whole situation that night. The atmosphere, which in the three weeks since Phil's marriage had been charged with dangerous electricity, cleared. Gail was not only nice to Lily;

she seemed able, with her own peculiar winning sweetness, to put herself in Lily's place. It was as if she had a part to play, and was determined to play it to its utmost limits.

For the first time, to-night, she spoke of the marriage, its suddenness and surprise. If Lily suspected some lingering trace of apology in this she gave no sign, but she brightened visibly, and the dinner table was more like its old self than it had been since the Saturday of Edith's and Gail's return.

Phil, in the fatuous blindness of love, was radiant with satisfaction, and Edith dolefully confided to her sister when they were alone that the effect of their heroism would be merely that Phil would feel now that they could all go on living together indefinitely—the happy family in which men are so pathetically eager to believe.

"No, he won't do that!" said Gail. "For I'm going to talk to him to-morrow, and get everything definitely settled. Then we'll only have to work toward our goal. Enough money for the smallest overhead expenses we can manage, and then you and I'll get out—out of Clippersville forever!"

"I love Clippersville," Edith said dreamily.

Gail looked at her speculatively.

"I believe you do!"

"I don't think anyone could love a place more. I always think of Clippersville as the sweetest place in the world," the younger sister pursued. "When I'm walking to Müller's in the mornings, and all the lawn sprinklers are going in the gardens, and the tree shadows are all around—or going up to the dam Sunday nights . . . . Nowhere—not in Naples, not in Switzerland—could there be a lovelier view of the valleys and the bay marshes than there is from the dam."

"Just the same, I'm going to get *out,* Edith Lawrence!"

"And just the same, I'm going with you, Abigail!"

This on a Monday, the last of September. On the Tuesday, on the Wednesday, Gail looked for her chance to talk to Phil, in vain. There was a great deal of noise and interruption wherever Lily's three small boys were concerned; it was almost impossible for the adult members of the family to find a chance for uninterrupted conference. And in the evenings the honeymooners usually wandered away into the dusk, not to return until Gail and her books were established in bed.

On this particular Thursday Gail went home to lunch to find Edith and Lily in a glory of housecleaning. Edith was at home because of the sudden death of young Mrs. Müller, and she and Lily were making the most of an opportunity to straighten out the only half-occupied house. The boys' beds were to go into a different room, and Sam's room was to be repapered; there was no end to the small changes or to the pleasure with which the family anticipated them. Lily and Edith appeared to be working together harmoniously enough, and Gail walked back to the library at one o'clock moralizing in her own soul upon the desirability of making the best of things in this curious world, putting up with what could not be changed, enduring what could not be cured. The only way to get past certain things in life was to plunge right through them, like them—or pretend you did—learn from them, and go on to other lessons.

The early October day was somber and overcast, without rain, but equally without sun. Leaves were turning restlessly in the gardens; other leaves, heaps of them, were being raked into damp, somber piles that smoked in the lifeless, ominous air and scented the world with autumn. A strange hush lay over the town; something was expected, something was drawing nearer and nearer across the great range of the eastern mountains and under the pale cool sky.

Edith and Gail almost always walked home together. But Edith was not downtown to-day, and Gail had no need to stop at Müller's book department as usual. It was the third, the night they called the "house's birthday," and Gail—reflecting rather ungraciously that they might as well break Lily into some of the customs of the Lawrence household, since the poor little creature appeared to be only too anxious to copy her new family's ways and ideas, stopped at the hardware store and bought twelve new drinking glasses.

"Did you wish them wrapped as a gift, Miss Lawrence?"

"Well, yes," Gail said, with a whimsical twist to the corners of her mouth. "Wrap them as a gift."

"We haven't given Phil and Lily anything," she thought as she walked on. "Well, they didn't give us any warning. Perhaps Edith and I'll make some gesture—some day, before we leave. And Ariel—Mother's poet! To have no wedding, no fun, no beauty. And not to have loved us. She couldn't have loved us, to walk out that Christmas night and send us no word—never to write.

"It's a funny world. Things seem to happen to us Lawrences. But such queer things, and in such funny ways."

The two older Cass boys—they were to be Lawrence boys soon, for Phil, in his gentle way, adored his stepsons and was eager to have them take his name—the two older Cass boys were digging contentedly down at the end of the garden where the grass was sprouting green and pale in the shadow of the heavy evergreen fence. Gail saw their faded blue coveralls and dark rough heads, and waved at them as she followed the uneven, discolored flags of the path to the side door.

Still such a somber, brooding day, without rain and without sun, and with early dusk already settling everywhere—the promise of winter everywhere.

And then Phil in the kitchen chopping ice—chopping ice . . .? And Lily flying down the back stairway, with a terrible face—a terrible face.

"Gail! Edith was hurt."

"Edith!"

"She fell. She struck her head." This was Lily. She gestured with an arm. Gail ran.

Ran. Through the dark dining room that was scented with damp and decay and apples, into the sitting room—the little sitting room with the books and the air-tight stove.

Edith was unconscious on the couch, her eyes closed. Her soft tawny hair was damp, her forehead wet. A girl—Mary Rumbold—was there, white and concerned, watching, not touching Edith.

"I thought you were the doctor, Gail," Mary said in a still voice. "We took off her shoes," she added inconsequentially.

Gail was breathing in great spent breaths. She could not speak. Her lips moved soundlessly.

"She fell——?" asked the silent, moving lips.

"No." Phil was beside his sister, his arm about her.

She leaned against him, suddenly spent. "No. It was the statue—the Neapolitan Boy," he said. "One of the kids—Danny—ran against it. Mary and Edith were just going out, and Ede leaned over and caught at the pedestal—and it toppled and struck her."

"How long ago?"

"Ten minutes. We telephoned you."

"Doctor?"

"He's on his way."

"Phil—Phil——" she whispered, swallowing.

"I don't know, Gail. We don't know. Lily says that one of her brothers——"

Lily knelt beside Edith, and with her gentle, common, stubby little hands fitted an improvised ice bag on Edith's head.

"Ah, that's lovely, Gail!" Edith said unexpectedly in a clear, low, happy voice. "Are we swimming? Green—green—green water—like emeralds—wet emeralds."

She lapsed into silence again, sighing contentedly.

"She's coming out of it; it was only a shock," Phil said, frowning, with a reassuring nod and glance for Gail.

Gail had flung off her coat and hat, had taken Lily's place, kneeling on the floor, Edith's limp hand in both of hers.

She was not conscious of the passing of time. She was conscious of but one thing—Edith. She must hold Edith here, by the sheer power of that sisterly love that was the strongest love in her life.

Dr. Peters was here, and Dr. Reynolds. They wanted another opinion, a man from San Francisco. Concussion, undoubtedly, and possibly fracture, but it might be that both were slight. In undertones, in the hall, old Dr. Peters told Phil of other cases—cases from which one never would have supposed that little boys could recover. But they had.

"Dr. Remsinger from San Francisco is coming," Phil told Gail when she emerged, white and dazed, from the sitting room at ten o'clock.

"You told them to send for him?"

"I told them that if they wanted a man from New York they were to get him!"

"Phil, I'm glad he's coming."

"He's being driven down now. He'll be here about three. And they both say that if Edith goes on all right until this time to-morrow she's got a good chance."

The weary eyes were raised.

"This time to-morrow?"

"That's what they said."

"Then the only thing to do is—live, until this time to-morrow."

Lily brought her warm wrapper, her slippers, downstairs, set a cup of hot coffee before her.

"Oh, thank you, Lily," Gail said, with the first honestly affectionate look she had ever given her little sister-in-law.

"Oh, Gail, if it hadn't been Danny!" Lily said, weeping.

"Poor Danny!" Gail murmured, with a steady, dry-eyed shadow of her old smile.

She went back to her post, sitting in the low chair that had been "Mother's rocker" for twenty-five years. Old Dr. Peters came and went in the quiet room. Lily was up all night; Phil and Sam kept vigil in the kitchen.

Sometimes Edith murmured. At about two o'clock she opened her eyes, looked straight at Gail, and said, in her own smiling way, "I'll tell you, Gail. I'll go first and get the cottage ready, and be waiting for you!"

"All right, my darling," Gail's trembling, tender voice answered. To Lily she murmured, as Edith went deeply off into unconsciousness again, "Put that comforter over her feet, will you, Lily? She doesn't feel any too warm."

Lily had been kneeling. But she was on her feet now, and as she brought the comforter a strange expression came into her face.

"Let's say some prayers, Gail!" she said suddenly, in a frightened tone.

"Ah, as if I hadn't! And she did, too," Gail whispered back. "We said our prayers together, just as we used to, a little while ago, and she seemed so sensible; just—*hungry*—for them."

"Dr. Remsinger is here," Phil announced in the doorway.

"Phil!" Lily said quickly, running to her husband, catching him importunately by the arm. "Take Gail away—Phil——"

"Take——?" Gail echoed. She got to her feet, looked dazedly from Phil to the doctor. The San Francisco physician was beside Edith. He had straightened up—had said something to Dr. Peters.

They were trying to make her leave Edith, and she would not go. She looked from face to face, terrified. Then she was conscious of choking, and of seizing Phil with both frantic hands and of trying to scream.

Then the room rocked and the world rocked, and there was nothing but blackness everywhere.

CHAPTER XX

GAIL went to the strange country of grief. She saw the sunlight changed and sickly, the trees brassy and dead; the country town, where all her life had been spent, was a pasteboard town now, a place of unrealities and emptiness.

Everyone was kind to her. She was amazed at the kindness, at the pains these good folk took, to help her through the echoing, queer days. She thanked them absently, came suddenly to consciousness, confusedly thanking them again.

Letters brought her beautiful messages; she found other beautiful words in books.

"Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted."

Grandma Polk, foremost in suffrage and prohibition and social work generally for half a century, copied out a poem for her in a trembling, beautifully clear old hand.

> I shall go gently, never fear—give little warning,
> Say not good-night, but in some happier sphere,
> Bid you good-morning.

Old Man Whitman, who had known Stevenson, sent her the exquisite verses he had written for one in grief:

> He is not dead, this friend; not dead,
> But in the path we mortals tread

Got some few trifling steps ahead, and nearer to the end.
So that you, too, once past the bend
Shall meet again as face to face this friend
You fancy dead.
Push gaily on, strong heart! The while
You travel forward mile by mile
He loiters with a backward smile
Till you can overtake
And strains his eyes to search his wake,
Or whistling, as he sees you through the brake,
Waits on a stile.

"The dove, finding no place to rest her foot, returned to him in the ark," said the priest gravely at Edith's funeral.

And browsing among the books to which she turned with the sure instinct of the living creature that must fight for its life, Gail found all the rich record of loss, read "In Memoriam" and Browning, Emily Dickinson, Keats, Shelley.

She thought in lines of music. "Oh, lyric love, half angel and half bird . . ." she whispered, walking alone to the library in the cool winter mornings. "Oh, Edith, Edith, come back to me, belovèd, or I die!

"Parting is all we know of heaven," she read, in Emily Dickinson's verse, "and all we need of hell.

"Some losses are so great, we measure them by gain."

And when she found them, she memorized the immortal Greek beauty of Miss Guiney's lovely lines:

The early moon, from Ida's steep,
  Comes to the empty wrestling ring,
The children, without laughter,
  Lead his war horse to the watering.
  Alas, alas! the one inexorable thing . . .

Miss Mary Tevis, the rich, eccentric old maid who had once given Edith dresses and hats, took Gail with her to Santa Barbara for Christmas. They drove down in the big Tevis car, and stayed at an enormous hotel, saw movie queens entertaining hilarious friends at dinner, spent whole mornings swimming, idling on the sand. They went to a big inter-collegiate game in Pasadena, and came back to Clippersville feeling that somehow they had cheated the year, and that there had been no Christmas at all.

The oil company began to build a trim little station, all red-and-white paint and fences, on the corner of the Lawrence place, and Phil spent his Saturday afternoons and Sundays clearing the overgrown garden at the other side of the house, chopping down moldy old shrubs and trees starved and cramped for light and air.

The trees fell with long crashes in the hot January sunshine, and lay prone across the pampas grass and verbena bushes. Light streamed oddly into the dining room, and into the downstairs sitting room, where Edith had lain muttering on a chill October afternoon. The old house seemed shabbier than ever in this humiliating undressing, and yet it was good to have the great oaks on the western side of the garden exposed in all their stalwart beauty, and to obliterate the old paths with their bottle borders, and roll the tortured and raked earth smooth for a lawn.

Phil and Sam toiled and sweated happily at the changes; the small boys tumbled ecstatically, like worm-hunting robins, in their wake. Great brush fires smoked up into the clear warm spring air, and the ashes sifted softly upon Lily and Gail, who sat on the steps of the side porch and gave general directions as to the pruning of vines and the lopping of branches.

The heavily massed foliage gave way, parted, fell in great clumsy masses to the ground. Sometimes both men got tangled in it, and had to be helped out, with panting and laughter. Sunshine flooded the house that had been robbed of it for forty years; the rusty marks of the vines showed on the shabby paint.

"They are happy," Gail thought, seeing Phil grow younger, simpler, more contented every hour. The disreputable old house, weather-beaten without and within, was heaven to him. Lily, paler now than she had been, her slender shapeless body already rounding out toward motherhood again, held in her stubby little common Wibser hand the keys of life for Phil. He loved the three little busy tramps who bustled about in the yard all day long, hammering, mixing mud, splashing in water, climbing the windmill, chasing the chickens. Phil had never been ambitious, socially or in a business way; what other men did, what the neighbors meant, signified nothing to Phil.

"They are happy, and I mustn't spoil it. Sam will marry here in Clippersville, just as Phil has, and they'll always be friends. And when I can I'll go away, I'll find my sort of living, too.

"But until I go, I must add to their happiness. Nobody—nobody ought to suffer, if there's any way out!"

She and Lily were not alike, but they had gained a certain sympathy now; they had interests in common, they were drawn together by mutual good sense and necessity.

If Lily had ever annoyed Gail, she did not annoy her now. Lily's complete lack of culture was nothing —Gail never thought of it. Lily's little airs and graces as Mrs. Phil Lawrence passed unnoticed. Lily could go to the movie with Phil, at the end of the long, busy day; there was no imposition in leaving the children with Gail, for Gail was at home anyway, and the children adored her.

She spent a wet March evening pasting pictures in her camera book, turning the pages backward, lingering against her will over the little prints.

Ariel, about ten, a fairylike little creature, with ringlets. Edith, in her white sweater, laughing and holding the dog—what was his name?

"Phil, what was the name of that mongrel we had for awhile?"

"Bim?"

"Bim."

Pictures taken out on the Stanislaus place with the Stebbinses. Dick a rough-headed, long-legged fellow of twenty, little Sam all freckles and elbows.

Picnic pictures, up at the dam. Edith, quite a little girl, laughing, with her eyes glowing under a broad straw hat, and in the gingham Miss Lotty had made her. Pictures with Papa in them: Papa opening a bottle of olives—Papa going off bicycling with Dr. Smith.

And Edith again—and again—and again: in her bathing suit; in a kitchen apron, with a big spoon; in her kimono, with her drying hair all over her shoulders.

"I think I could bear it better, Phil," Gail said sometimes, "if she'd had all the beauty and sweetness she wanted so—if she hadn't had to plug to Müller's day after day, in her shabby little corduroy dress!"

"But she was happy, Gail. She was one of the happiest girls I ever knew. If she could just have *you*——"

But this would be too much. Gail must flash from the room, flying, hurrying bowed before the storm.

Phil had a second-hand, indeed a fifth-hand, car; a machine that only his own patience and knowledge of machinery kept moving at all. On a certain March Sunday he asked Gail rather timidly if she thought it would be a good day to take their luncheon up to the dam.

Gail looked up with her perplexed little smile, bringing her thoughts home, drawing her thick dark brows together for a second. Then her serious face brightened.

"Oh, Phil, it'd be a marvelous day for it!"

He looked at her as if he had never seen her before, although he gave no sign of finding a change in her. But there was something actually beautiful in Gail's face now, something disciplined, spiritualized, something for which Phil this morning found the word "noble." Somehow he felt a blur over his eyes, and a certain dry thickness in his throat, as she began, with all her old readiness and easiness, the familiar preparations.

"Of course you never saw any sandwiches like them, Milesy, because I invented them. When Uncle Sam was only a little boy, he and my sister Ariel . . ."

Stab, stab, stab at her heart. Her voice went on.

"He and my sister Ariel used to ask for 'heavenly' sandwiches, and I used to make them this way—deviled ham, and jelly, and cheese, and anything else I had—all together."

Her mild, sweet-tempered look went kindly to the little boy. Her skillful hands went on slicing the big loaf, trimming crusts, pressing the filled halves of the sandwiches together.

"See if there are any of those paper napkins on that shelf, Phil."

She looked up, caught her brother's gaze.

"What is it, Phil?"

"Nothing!" Phil said.

If the sight of the shining dam, surrounded by feathery spring greenery, hurt her when she and Phil, Sam, Lily, and the children reached it at a glowing noontide—if the sight of it hurt her, she gave no sign. She wandered up the twisting course of the creek, past rippling shallows and emerald pools, climbing over great boulders and knotted tree roots, following with her serious eyes the flitting of a little school of trout down the stream, or the course of a dragonfly's flight across quivering waters, or over the level spaces of new meadow grass.

There were delicate iris, lavender, cream, and purple, blooming profusely in the shade, and mission bells, tall and brown, and buttercups. Gail, when she came back to the group, had her hands full of them; she set them carefully in a quiet little backwater pool to keep fresh. Phil noted that her thick dark eyelashes were wet, and her eyes ringed faintly with umber. Busily, efficiently, she set about the preparing of the luncheon, she and Lily murmuring as they made coffee and toasted little sausages on sharpened sticks.

Afterward the children dug and splashed in the creek, and their elders grouped themselves on the shingle, talking of Clippersville affairs and Clippersville folk.

Lily had the peculiar quality, not unusual in women of her alert, keen type, of being able to make even the most casual gossip interesting. What she did not herself know about the old families in town, her mother and grandmother did, and Lily had been listening to Ma and Gram all her life.

Gail listened fascinated to her stories. They were never sensationally told, although they dealt with murders, mysteries, feuds, crimes, life, and death. But there was something in the details, in the general pictures Lily painted about them, that Gail found inexhaustibly entertaining.

Just now, when the waters of her own soul were running so low, Lily's stream of conversation had its uses; it soothed Gail, it diverted her from too constant a contemplation of the dark current of her own life.

"Old Mrs. Peevey," Lily would recount, "always felt that Jim Canna was there the night Belle White was killed—or knew something about it anyway—and she used to go to the courtroom . . .

"Ma had gone over to get a cup of yeast risin's from Lizzie Gunn . . .

"She says, 'Do you s'pose you have a piece of that gray voile in your piece bag, Mis' Wibser?' . . .

"Ma didn't have her clothes off for four nights. She always sets up with the Rogers family when they die. . . .

"And old Mrs. Gansey tore her hair—Gram says she just twisted it like it was so much cotton yarn—and she says, 'It was them boots drug him to his death!' . . .

"They say when Old Man O'Connor was dying he kep' sorter groping on the bed, and Daisy—she was expecting any minute then—Daisy says, 'Do you want your big blackthorn stick, Pa?' 'Yes,' he says, 'I don't know where I'm going, Daze, and I'd just as soon have my stick in my hand!' "

It was all real, all human; Gail was conscious of a little thrill of pleasurable anticipation when Lily got into a narrative vein.

And of course there was always plenty to talk about in Clippersville. There was always a fire, an accident, a marriage or divorce to supply interest and to lead the conversation off into countless collateral and connected lines.

To-day there was the astonishing fact of the Wilcox baby to discuss. An eight-pound boy normally born to a normal and happy mother, and putting on an ounce a day—nobody in Clippersville could believe it, least of all the happy parents.

"He acts," Gail said, "like a person in a dream."

"Ma and Gram," said Lily, "went over to see the baby because Gram nursed Mrs. Wilcox's mother for seven years—she was a paralytic—and she says that Mrs. Wilcox was crying, and she ast her would she look at Sterling—what do you know about Sterling for a name!—and she says, 'Shall we call the doctor?' she says. 'He's been lying like that for fifteen minutes!' and Ma says, 'All he's doing is snoring, Louise!' and honestly," said Lily, with a pathetic, serious look at the others—"honestly I thought my grandmother would pass quietly out of the picture, I honestly did!"

And when Gail, who laughed so rarely now, would laugh at this, Lily would look surprised. But she liked to hear Gail laugh, just the same, and Phil always rewarded his garrulous little wife with a look of gratitude.

To-day they also had to discuss, as did all Clippersville, the amazing, the sensational bankruptcy of the

Murchison Flour Mills. Rumor had been playing with this possibility for some time, but Clippersville was as full of rumors as an army camp, and nobody had taken seriously the idea that the invincible Murchison fortune might fall.

But fallen it had, completely, entirely. The Clippersville mills, the Salinas offices, the New Jersey plant had all passed into other hands, the Chipps' mansion was for sale, and the Chipps were going to live, without a servant, on the Los Gatos ranch and try to make it pay.

It was all too bewildering! Why, the mere name Murchison had been one with which to conjure for a generation, and for years everybody had told everybody else that they had been "coining" money, that they had had "scads," that they were "made" of it!

The Murchisons and the Chipps, with their trips to New York and their fashionable affiliations with San Francisco and Burlingame! This was a tumble for them, sure enough. "They say that Arthur Murchison could have been sent to jail!" Clippersville said, not without satisfaction.

"What d'you suppose will happen to Van, Gail?"

"I was thinking. He was working at the New Jersey plant, the last I heard."

"I thought he was abroad?"

"He was—with another boy. Or he was going. Mrs. Chipp told Edith——"

A pause. Gail saw Müller's book department, and the fashionable, white-gloved Mrs. Chipp pausing to patronize grave little Edith in her corduroy dress.

"He'll have to get to work now!" Phil said, with a chuckle.

"Every penny he had came from his stepfather," Gail added, "and if Mr. Murchison really is down and out, Van will have a hard time!"

"Prob'ly the best thing that could happen to him!" Lily opined heartlessly. They talked of other things, but they always came back to the Murchison failure.

The March day grew very hot at the dam; there was no wind. Lily's three little boys after lunch crept into the shade near the grown-ups, and laying whining, panting, and fretting, their faces flushed and wet with heat.

Dreamily, as if absently, Gail began to tell them a story.

"Well, once there were three little boys, just the ages of you and Miles and Danny, Wolfe. Their names were Hammy, Jammy, and Sammy—Hammy, Jammy, and Sammy Formaldehyde."

"They were relations of the immortal family?" asked Phil in the pause, his heart beat quickening. Gail had fallen to dreaming, with her eyes far away.

"They were——" She roused herself, smiled a little. "They were Monica's children."

"Oh, Monica married then?"

"Monica married a sewing-machine agent."

"Oh?" said Phil. A look of peace came into his kind, worried eyes. He settled back. "Go ahead!" he said.

The hot spring sun beat down upon the sapphire waters of the dam, but where the creek widened and spread at its mouth the shade of the redwoods fell, and there was greenness and coolness. Only the dragonflies were moving in the fragrant March world; there was no cloud in the Italian blue of the sky, no splash of fish in the dam.

Up on the surrounding ring of the guardian hills the lilac was still blooming, in pale blue plumes; the manzanita streaked the summits with creamy lines; even the bay trees bore golden tips. A bluejay screamed like a bullet through the air, and was gone. Then silence, and the ripple—ripple—ripple of the water that accentuated the silence once more, and Gail's slow, rich, hesitating voice beginning the new chronicles of the Formaldehydes. But no Formaldehyde story had ever affected Gail before quite as this one did. This was new. This was creation.

The hour marked a change in her, and she felt it without realizing just what it meant. She knew, vaguely, that everything was different, on this March Sunday—the sky bluer than she had ever known it before, the buttercups more mysteriously golden, every new leaf, every crystal shadow in the dam or flash of diamonds in the creek penetrated with new meaning, with unearthly light.

Phil, in his shabby oldest clothes, Lily, already a little clumsy and slow in movement, seemed to thrill and throb with the cosmic pulse of the whole great world, and more than all—more than sky and trees, creek water and blossoming spring—Gail felt herself alive, alive with everything that lived. Gail Lawrence, nearly twenty-seven years old, tawny-headed, blue-eyed, lithe, strong, adequate—feeling, remembering, acting, loving and suffering—was living at last!

The miracle of it remained with her as they went home in the late afternoon; stayed with her illuminating, interpreting, changing all the commonplaces of life into glory. Gail felt dazed with felicity; it must not stop, this penetrating, poignant sweetness. She knew it would not stop.

She went through a week of floating, of dreaming.

"Is this you with me, Edith?" her soul would ask as she stamped and penciled books and slips, smiled and answered at the library desk. "Are you helping me at last?"

And then, a week after the picnic, came a Sunday of deluge, when Phil and Lily went to a movie and Gail took the three little boys for a wet walk. The older two came back contentedly enough to blocks and crayons, but little Danny was almost too tired for luncheon, and quite too tired to play, and at three o'clock Gail sponged his sticky little face and put him down on her bed, with her old woolly dog, for a nap.

"Riff-raff," she said to him affectionately, straightening her big room, putting another log of wood—wood from the famous old Lawrence pine that had come down only a few weeks ago—into the little stove.

"Wiff-waff," Danny as affectionately returned.

Gail closed bureau drawers, straightened books on the shelves. She carried a finished, fat, satin-bound, microscopic blue blanket into Lily's room, stood looking thoughtfully at Lily's upper bureau drawer that was already filling with bands and knitted jackets for Philip, junior.

In the hall, she called down to the sitting room, "Wolfe! Everything all right?"

"I'm down here," Sam called back. "I'm building these kids a cattle barn!"

Gail went back into her room. Little Riff-raff was asleep, looking like a tousle-headed angel. The room was warm and orderly and still, rain tapped, tapped, tapped tirelessly on the tin of the kitchen roof. Clippersville was buried in wet tree tops, in the silent Sunday afternoon; here and there blue smoke struggled up above the oaks and elms and pear branches.

On Gail's desk lay a heap of paper—large sheets—and her own green fountain pen. She sat down, dreamy eyes fixed on space, the pen's smooth butt pressed against her cheek.

"I don't know why I shouldn't write stories," she mused, half aloud. "I've *read* enough!

"Ede, wouldn't it be funny if I were really to be a writer some day?

" 'To the dear memory of my sister, Edith Partington Lawrence.' "

The pen touched the paper; began to move.

Danny slept deeply, luxuriously, in the center of the big bed, the old woolly dog tightly clasped to his shabby little underwaist. Rain streamed steadily down the high windows, and drummed on the tin roof; the high feathery new tops of the trees below moved gently in the constant onslaught of the warm drops. Wood fell in the stove, and flamed up and was quiet again.

After awhile Gail threw a covered sheet aside, numbered a second, covered that. She pushed back her hair; her face was pale, her eyes shining. The scratching of the pen recommenced. The clock struck, struck again. Danny slept on, and the rain continued to fall.

But at six, when Lily was home and the boys having supper in the kitchen, a hot, golden sunset suddenly broke over the world. Gail walked up past the old stables, and saw the light shining red on the trunks of the oaks and on the village and on the woodpile, and straining itself through the screen of the young grape leaves. Everything sparkled and glittered, scents heavy, wet and delicious crowded the air; the broken tumbler, that had been on the pump ever since Gail could remember anything at all, was a diamond to-night, and the tiny yellow balls of chickens, cheeping and tumbling after their officious mother across the wet grass, were almost more of beauty than the human heart could bear.

She reflected that she would do her full share of the dinner work and of the dishwashing afterward. Then she would take a bath, and get into pajamas and wrapper, and arrange shoes and dress for the library day to-morrow, and carry her week's laundry—for this was Sunday night—out to the big basket in the upper back hall.

And then she would light her desk lamp, and draw those five scribbled pages toward her, and in a silence and solitude of her own room read them once again—and find them good.

The loss of Ariel, the deeper blow of Dick's loss, Phil's marriage had been earthquake, the unbearable last burden after the burdened years. And beyond that had been the consuming flame of Edith's going, the unthinkable thing, the death of something that was herself, that was her own life.

The earthquake and the fire. And now into Gail's heart comfort came creeping back, new interest, new hope—the still small voice of the Lord.

Thus began the new life, in the unchanged setting of the old. Gail did not know whether what she dreamed and what she wrote was good or was not good, nor did she care. It had to come, and the coming was a sort of ecstatic bearing—a giving of life.

In April she had the letter: a dozen typewritten lines:

DEAR MISS LAWRENCE:

The readers report that, delightful as this story is, it is "not quite in our tone." The feeling of the *Atlantic* is that, when a tale is as intimately true to life as this is of yours, the tone is surely a tone for the *Atlantic* to adopt.

It gives us much pleasure to accept so admirable a story.

Very truly yours,

THE EDITOR.

The dull old grimy kitchen swooped and soared about her. She had been hulling strawberries, putting every twelfth one into Danny's expectant mouth, open at her knee.

The letter from the *Atlantic* had strawberry juice on it; no matter. It shook like a tacking sail as she read it again.

"Phil! Look here a minute."

"My—Gawd!" said Phil, upon reading it.

"Read it, Sam!"

"When'joo write a *story!*" Sam said, incredulous.

"Oh, Phil, you don't suppose—you don't suppose I'm—I'm going to write!"

"Well, for heaven's sakes," Lily said patiently, "the way you carried on, I thought someone was dead!"

Gail sat at the table, her elbows resting on the worn oilcloth, her strawberry-stained fingers pressing the crushed letter against her face. She felt as if her body had taken wings and was about to lift itself up into the air.

"Phil Lawrence," she whispered presently, taking her hands down, regarding him seriously, "I've sold a story!"

He looked at her kindly from the old rocker. Lily tired easily now, and had established her shapeless person wearily on his knee. Phil's eyeglassed eyes looked over Lily's head.

" 'Bout time something good came to you, Gail," Phil said simply. His sister felt the words to be an accolade.

"Oh, I can't believe it—it isn't me!" Gail whispered. "It's—it's the Lawrence luck, coming back!"

She got up and carried the glass dish of strawberries into the dining room. She lifted the cover of the pail, and poured the lightly tumbling hulls down into it. With a damp old rag she wiped the oilcloth, afterward at the sink rubbing her finger tips with a withered half lemon. And all the time the juice-stained letter blazed in the breast pocket of her old midshipman's blouse like a burning jewel.

CHAPTER XXI

SO CAME Clippersville to be proud of another Lucky Lawrence. A thousand pleasant little episodes, as the summer wore along, told Gail that she was famous and that her old friends and neighbors were glad.

The *Challenge* ran her picture with a flattering article. Patrons of the old library, coming and going in the hot afternoons, smiled at her over the broad desk top.

"Tickled to death to hear we have an *authoress!*" the women whispered, nodding and smiling. Gail would flush brightly, joyfully, in return. She saw them all differently now, these busy, strained young mothers, with their babies in rompers and sun-bonnets; these shapeless big middle-aged women with their corsets showing under their dingy voiles. They were her marionettes now; they moved to the strings in her fingers.

Walking home, in the burning bright sunsets, she looked at the hills that ringed sleepy Clippersville, those gauzy, transparent hills that were the color of the sky all summer long. She looked at the great oaks and the locusts that lined the Calle, and the magnolias and peppers on the lawns. She looked at the stout women in cottage gardens; women with hair wetly, smoothly dressed; women watering marigolds and wallflowers in the afternoon shadows. They were all beautiful to her.

If Lily telephoned her, and she had to stop in the market, she saw the market or the fruit store or the five-and-ten with new eyes. Their wilted wares, their wearied salesfolk, their anxious bargainers were newly dramatic. When some shabby woman from Thomas Street Hill, with a fat, drooling baby on her arm, and another stumbling and whining at her knee, priced the pork chops, priced the chopped beef, looked worriedly from one to the other, Gail felt her heart go out on a rush of love and sympathy for all poverty—all motherhood. She did not know why.

She had letters from persons, far-away unknown persons, praising her story when it was published. Gail answered them simply, unable to believe the words that flowed from her fountain pen. She could presently write:

> If you liked "Simply Impossible," I hope you will like "Post Office Closed To-morrow." It is coming out very soon in some magazine.

The great Barnes Rutherford, ill, idling in a palace on the Maine coast, wrote her. He, sixty-five, the dean of the greatest profession of all, could find time to write to a little Clippersville girl, and tell her he thought "Simply Impossible" was a good story!

Even more touching were the literary folk of Clippersville. It had so many! Wistful, discarded men and women, living in shabby little gas-lighted cottages smothered in dusty vines, suddenly appeared on all sides, and proudly claimed kinship with the writer. Gail accepted their condescensions graciously; she knew that she was not of their ilk.

Miss Libby Gatty had sold a story to the *Black Cat* twenty-five years ago; a story that one of the judges had thought deserved first prize. Miss Lou Bennett had known Edward Townsend, who wrote the Chimmie Fadden stories, when she had been in New York with her uncle in 1897, and had met Archibald Clavering Gunther.

"Oh, my uncle knew everybody!" said Miss Lou, tossing her withered head, growing splotchy in the face at the mere exciting memory. "He knew Frank Munsey; he knew everybody!"

Tottering old Kane Rissette had had quite a literary experience as one of the publicity agents of a big railroad in the days before he drank so hard. He lived with a widowed sister now, and Min Rissette Riggs kept him in order. He delighted in remembering all the literary lights who had come into the office of the railroad magazine and had paid their written, and sometimes rhymed, tributes to California.

Then there were the poets, most of them women. They tremblingly brought out for Gail's inspection their hoarded clippings, discolored strips of newspaper or magazine pages. Mrs. Jadwin, who ran a boarding house down by the flour mills, had once won a twenty-five-dollar prize for a poem called "Cloud Voices."

"Oh, my dear!" said Hatty Schenck, who wrote women's club news for the newspapers all over the state, and nature poems beginning "Hail!" and whose pen name was "Lillian Lynne." "Oh, my dear, is there any moment in the world like the one when you know you're *getting* it, you're in the mood? For, you know, I can't always write," Hatty rushed on. "Sometimes . . ."

There were times when she just felt dull and blank, as if she'd never written a line. And then, suddenly, perhaps when she was in the kitchen with Mama . . .

"Oh, I know!" Gail would sympathize, with dancing eyes.

And all the time, deep within her, she knew that she and Hatty were not alike. She knew that she could lean down to Hatty, but that Hatty could never reach up to her. It made her humble, and sometimes, when it came to her with a fresh pang of realization that only Edith could have shared all this truly, that only Edith would have appreciated it—indeed, that she owed much of it to the poem-loving, book-loving, truth-loving little sister—she felt a deeper sorrow even than the younger sorrow had been.

Lily sat sewing or idling on the side porch in the afternoons, and the three little boys worked in the wide yard. The heavy shabby pines, the pampas jungles, the crowding rank dusty roses were all cleared away now, as were even the twisted, bottle-edged paths that had circled below them for two generations. Sam and Phil had carried their work as far as trimming off the dry limbs of oaks and peppers; the shorn trees sent rich lacy shadows across the new sheen of the grass.

"Lily, what's for dinner?" Gail would ask out of a dream.

"The cream puffs and corn and the peaches, and there's a lot of cold rice. I thought maybe poached eggs."

"It's too hot for meat."

Silence again.

"Thinking up another story, Gail?"

"Well, there's one kind of teasing me."

"I can kinder tell by your eyes when you're thinking of your sister," Lily said once.

"Edith?"

"Well, I was thinking of Ariel, then."

"Ariel . . ." Gail always said the name on a long sigh. "She couldn't wait," she would muse aloud sorrowfully. "Doesn't it seem funny, Lily, for a person to go away—just as if she had died—and never to write—never to send any word?"

"She may have a houseful of kids by now," Lily, whose mind rather dwelt upon this subject, might suggest.

"Even if she had——!"

"Did you like Richard Stebbins, Gail?"

A quick twist at her heart. A quick memory of a man's ugly, fine face and slow smile. But Gail's voice would come quietly enough.

"Oh, very much.

"Even if I could account for Ariel, I couldn't for him," she said once.

"Every family has some member in it that acts that way," Lily generalized shrewdly.

In September, when the autumn haze hung like a hot veil over the valley and grass fires smoked along the burned dry fields, Lily's daughter was born. Gail, as tenderly as if the tiny, soggy, snuffling scrap had been the Holy Grail, carried the newcomer down through the big open house to the kitchen, where she tremblingly wiped and oiled the mottled, writhing, weeping little scrap of womanhood.

"God grant that I don't hurt you, baby!" said the Second Gail Lawrence to the Third, aloud.

The baby did not die under her ministrations, anyway. She whimpered, as her waving little saffron arms were introduced into the microscopic shirt, but when Phil and Lily's mother came down, hot and anxious, half an hour later, the little Gail was sound asleep in her namesake's arms.

"She's real pretty, Phil!" said the grandmother proudly.

"Is she?"

"Well, she's jest as cute's she can be. I don't know's Lily's ever had a better-lookin' baby. She's got the Lawrence look, all right."

"Look at the Lawrence eyebrows, Phil."

"Gee, she's sleeping hard," Phil observed, in a half-amused, half-resentful tone.

"Lily all right?"

"I suppose so!" he muttered discontentedly. "My *God!"* he said, under his breath.

He went to sit on the doorsill, his chin in his hands, elbows resting on knees. There was the silence of a dreaming autumn Sunday afternoon in the house that had been ringing with agony for the last endless hour. Old Mrs. Crowley went through the room with an unsightly bundle of linen. She lingered on her way to the laundry tubs to smile at the youngest Lawrence.

"She looks kinder mad at the way she was treated—yes, she does! She says, 'Why did ye yank me 'round that way, and spank me good, when I ain't done nothing!' " crooned the toothless old washwoman. "How do, Mis' Wibser. How's all your folks?"

"All real well, thanks, Mis' Crowley. How's Hazel?"

"Hazel had a bad spell last Sunday—'twas a week ago."

"You'd oughter be glad you don't have to have 'em!" Mrs. Wibser said to Phil's still bowed and horrified back in the doorway. She chuckled.

"Look at her *sleep*—the darling," Gail murmured.

"I always say that if the men had to have 'em every other time, there'd only be two babies, his and then hers, and then no more!" old Mrs. Crowley said with relish.

"Ain't that true?" approved Mrs. Wibser.

"Wiff-waff, come here and see your sister!"

"It's about time you got married, Gail, and had a few of your own!"

"Children have to have an old maid aunt, Mrs. Crowley."

"What say?"

"I said that all children have to have an old maid aunt."

"Baby?" asked Riff-raff, at Gail's knee, with a solemn upward glance.

"Your baby sister."

"Mrs. Lawrence," Betty Crooks, sailing into the room in all her formal nurse's regalia, said authoritatively, "Mrs. Lawrence wants someone to go over to the Williamses' for the other children, and she said to tell you, Mr. Lawrence, that she feels fine and wants some tea!"

"Tea!" Phil echoed, outraged.

"Certainly. She feels fine, only she's sleepy. And she can have some tea before she goes off to sleep. Say," said Betty, who had been in school with Phil and Gail, "you aren't too tired to go up there and see her a minute?"

"Too tired, no!" Phil said dazedly. "But—but she doesn't want—you heard her—she feels as if I was to blame——"

"Oh, for goodness' sake, that was just at the finish!" Betty said wholesomely. "You go up and see her, and tell her I'm bringing up some tea!"

Phil, with one wild glance about, fled to the accompaniment of women's laughter.

"You're going to be lucky," Gail murmured to the child. "The girl that is born on the Sabbath day is wise and lucky and good and gay!"

The little, warm, pulpy hand held tightly, confidingly, to her finger. It seemed gripped already about her heart. There was a smell of household oils, of clean new flannels, of sweet baby dampness. The baby seemed to sag limply against her arm.

"You look like you could sit there forever, holdin' that child, Gail!"

"I feel as if I never wanted to let her go, Mrs. Wibser."

"They won't do that with everyone," Mrs. Wibser said—"lay so quiet, and act so good! I'll bet you're goin' to think a sight of that baby."

"I'll bet I am," Gail said seriously.

"Well," said the old woman to her granddaughter, "you've started on a hard journey, young lady! Some day," she added to Gail, "some day she'll be tellin' folks, 'Why, yes, I was born in a place called Clippersville, in California.' Ain't that funny?"

"Maybe life is just a succession of births," Gail thought. But she did not say it aloud. It seemed to her sometimes, in these days, that her soul was passing through successive changes with an almost breath-taking rapidity.

"If they take *The Bells of Saint Giles,*" she mused, "I'll go to New York for a visit."

A little laugh broke over the new baby's head.

Gail's novel was barely begun; she did not know that it would ever be a novel. But still she thought: "If they really *do* take *The Bells of Saint Giles*, I'll go to New York."

She loved to hold the baby at this time of the day, and when Lily was downstairs again and autumn was deepening, darkening into winter, five o'clock often found Gail, with her little namesake in her arms, rocking, gossiping in the old kitchen, while Lily bustled about the dinner-getting, and the little boys stuffed themselves on fresh-cut bread and peanut butter at the table.

"I'll thicken that stew, Lily."

"I don't mind anything," Lily would say, "as long as you'll keep that young one quiet. What used to drive me nearly crazy was when they'd all begin to squawk just as I'd get my hands into the dinner!"

"Keep her quiet!" Gail would laugh. Gail the Third was a very model of babyhood. Nobody ever had any trouble keeping *her* quiet.

The days grew shorter; it was dark now when Gail came home from the library at five o'clock. As she sat cuddling the baby she could see the oak branches tossing in the dusk of the yard and the leaves scurrying down. The snap of wood in the old French range and the smell of toast and tea were very grateful now; there was a sense of coziness, of homeliness about it.

At this hour she would often fall to dreaming. It was an hour in which to remember Edith, talking eagerly of poetry, of drama, of utopias and philanthropy, as she buttered pudding dishes and peeled apples—an hour that brought back Ariel, spoiled, petulant, beautiful, always to be excused and adored by her sisters. Ariel, willful and discontented, scolding, raging, threatening, and presently to be whisked, limp and pitiful, upstairs to be comforted and sponged and soothed into sleep.

Above all, in the winter twilights, with the soft lump of babyhood that was another Gail Lawrence in her arms, Gail dreamed of Dick and of the brief moment of romance that had somehow seemed to give her her true values in life. She had been playing, playing idly and superficially, with Van Murchison, and she had awakened to the full realization of what her heart needed, what her heart could give, just a moment too late.

It had been Ariel, all the time, for big, sober, quiet Dick. He had never seen Gail; she had never tried to help him find her.

But she knew, in her heart, that she could have given him a thousand times what Ariel could give. Ariel must be changed indeed if she had become a helpful, tender mate for a struggling lawyer. Her restlessness, her haughty discontent, would not be cured by anything that Dick could provide for her. Ariel's ideal was not one of home making, of quiet and domesticity beside a fire. Hollywood—supposing them still to be in that neighborhood—would only inflame Ariel with a desire for luxury, fame, money.

But then they might long ago have left southern California. It was almost three years now since that memorable Christmas Day before Ariel's eighteenth birthday, when she and Dick had run away from them all. Gail had had two communications from her since; the first was the scribbled note she had left in her deserted bedroom, the note they had all read with such amazement and consternation; and the second had come a few months after Edith's death, and had been postmarked Phoenix, Arizona:

> Gail dear, I am so horribly sorry about darling Ede, but Gail she was happy. She was too good for this world and only would have had trouble and disappointment. I am well and so is Dick, and we are coming home soon to tell you all the news so no more now except that I adore you.

It had been signed simply "Ariel," and had borne neither date nor address.

One day Gail had driven Phil's car, full of small boys, out to the Stanislaus ranch. It was prosperous now, and the Lawrence's money troubles, preposterous and unexpected as the situation seemed, were over. Phil was doing well, Gail had had a raise, the oil station paid its hundred a month faithfully, and that money Phil handed over untouched to his sister.

The remains of the once magnificent Lawrence estate were divided; the old house was Phil's, the corner had been surveyed and measured and given to Gail, the Stanislaus property was wholly for Sam and Ariel. Rent went monthly into the bank in Ariel's maiden name. Sam paid his board to Lily.

Gail looked at the old ranch wistfully. She had dreamed once a brief dream of coming there with Dick, of being mistress of these acres of orchard and pasture and wheat fields. They could have been happy there, living in the moon-faced old farmhouse, under the great towering oaks and eucalyptus trees, surrounded by a tangle of sheds and fences, corrals and pastures, barns and fowl runs. They would have had children, would have driven into town in an old car, stopped for mail, for feed, for needles and egg beaters and ink at the five-and-ten. Dick would have had cases in the big courthouse in the shady square, where scared little Ariel had been summoned years ago, and Gail would have gone into the library to ask the girl at the desk for the new novels.

And on Sundays they would have telephoned Phil and Lily to ask what the chances were of a picnic up at the old dam. It was going to be hot to-day, and the children would love to get near to the water. Gail had cold chickens and tomatoes. If Lily would stop for cake somewhere . . .

"I might have had a boy and a girl by this time. But certainly I wouldn't have had time for any writing. There's that to think about! . . . Dick, I'd give up the chance of writing another *Iliad* to have had you love me, to have been Mrs. Dick Stebbins these three years."

There never would be anyone else; she was twenty-seven now, and the birthdays were coming faster and faster. Other men had wanted her, some of them fine men, men who could have given her at least the position Dick's wife would have had. But Gail was barely conscious of their existence. She was only vaguely regretful when she had to hurt or disappoint them.

Her own attitude troubled her, for like all normal girls she dreamed wistfully of marriage, of her own home, her own ties. Bob Porter, who worked with Phil in the iron works; Joe Clemence, one of Clippersville's rising dentists; young Dr. Adams; widowed Dana Sewell from the Murchison Mills; all these were merely empty names when they were presented to her. She could not somehow shake herself awake, and convince herself that she was playing with fate, that these men signified at all.

At twenty she might gladly have accepted any one of them, and made a success of it too. At twenty-seven they found her coldly kind. She was very happy, living in the old house with that preposterous wife of Phil's, and the children, and her brothers, and the characters in her books. Her blue eyes would be almost absent-minded under the faintly knitted, heavy Lawrence brows as she explained that she was not going to marry anyone.

No, it just did not seem to mean anything, marrying anyone else than Dick, and until it did, Gail would not consider it.

But sometimes she did consider the strangeness of the situation should Dick and Ariel come back to Clippersville. They would never know that his brother-in-law was shrined deep in Gail's heart. They need never know. But it would be hard—it would be hard to see him, to have him kiss her in fraternal fashion, to hear Ariel complaining of his treatment of his new clothes and of the care of his children!

Once, after Edith's death, Gail had written a simple, friendly letter to Dick's mother, trusting the post office to forward it to her in Oregon, where she lived now with a widowed daughter. Did Mrs. Stebbins know just where Dick was now? Gail had asked. She, Gail, had a book that he had wanted—and so on—and so on.

And Mrs. Stebbins had answered, in a painful hand, on ruled paper, that Dick was just about the worst letter writer that ever was; he had been some in L. A., and after that up to Las Vegas, and last she heard he was in Phoenix for three weeks, but he was coming home, according to what he wrote, and just as soon as he did Mrs. Stebbins would see he wrote Gail. Seemed like he had lost sight of his old friends.

There was no mention of Ariel or Dick's marriage in either letter. Gail had not dared risk the secret, and either Mrs. Stebbins had been equally cautious, or Dick had not taken his mother into his confidence.

Gail suspected, as the months wore along, what perhaps Dick's mother was too good, too simple, too trusting to suspect. She fancied sometimes that there was but one adequate explanation of Dick's and Ariel's silence. They were not happy; the impulsive marriage that had found her so young had proved a mistake. They were quarreling, perhaps already separated. The secret would remain always a secret—no one would ever know. And perhaps Ariel would come home some day, bitter and disillusioned, and take her old unhappy place in Clippersville society.

"Poor Ariel, poor Dick, poor all of us!" Gail would think.

"Some women live in their bodies, like Lily, loving and bearing and nursing babies. Perhaps they're the lucky ones. And some of us have to live in our minds and souls and dreams. But it's hard. It's hard to clasp air and kiss the wind forever! I can be a writer, I suppose. I certainly mean to make myself one, if work and trying will do it. But it would have been wonderful—wonderful, to be a wife!"

CHAPTER XXII

One rainy October afternoon Lily and the three older children were delayed at her mother's house down on Thomas Street Hill, the shabby cabin light-hearted Gail and Edith and Ariel Lawrence had once so despised, and Gail found herself alone in the big kitchen with the tiny Gail. Sam traveled up and down the coast now, doing press-agent work for a string of vaudeville theaters, and was as often in Portland or in Los Angeles as at home in Clippersville.

To-night Gail half expected him, and half expected that when Phil discovered his family's absence he would drive at once to the Wibser house and bring them all back. Meanwhile, in a rainy twilight that made the lights and shadows of the old kitchen more than usually pleasant, she fussed away contentedly with preparations for her own supper tray, for although the clock said only half-past five, this was a special night at the library, and she had to go back for a Directors' Meeting.

Wholewheat toast neatly buttered, thin hot tea, a piece of Lily's applesauce cake, and the remains of the corned-beef hash reheated and browned in a pan, and Gail felt herself ready for a feast. As she went to and fro she looked often at the great wash basket, lined with dotted swiss and blue ribbons from the five-and-ten, where the younger Gail was peacefully asleep.

"You little darling!" she would say, standing to look down at the puckered little featureless face and the desperately gripped little hand. She picked up the empty bottle, drained of milk, but still filmed with white. "No question about your appetite, baby!" said Gail.

Suddenly she heard a motor car on the old side drive, and heard the engine stop and a car door slam. Then there were footsteps on the porch, and the handle of the kitchen door turned. A second later, as Gail turned an inquiring glance that way and said aloud, "Phil?" the door swung open, and the dimly lighted aperture framed a woman's slender figure.

A young woman in a furred coat spattered lightly with rain, with a small hat drawn down over drifting flyaway golden hair. Ariel.

Gail stood, stricken motionless, for a moment. Then a great trembling and weakness came over her, and she took a step toward her sister and stretched out her arms. And Ariel came, with a bird's flight, across the kitchen and flung her own arms tightly about Gail.

"Oh, my darling—my darling!" Gail whispered, her wet cheek against Ariel's wet cheek. "You're back!"

"Gail!" Ariel sobbed.

"Oh, dearest—dearest!"

There was no bitterness, no memory, now. It was Ariel, the adored youngest, here against her heart again, living, loving, sorry, eager to be forgiven; there was nothing in Gail's feeling but one great ache of joy and pain and love.

"Gail, I've wanted you so!"

"And I you!"

"I've—*cried,*" Ariel confessed, crying now.

"But—but what fools we are to cry!" Gail stammered, laughing and crying both, with trembling lips and brimming eyes.

"I know!"

They drew apart, hands linked, and looked at each other.

"You look—older, Ariel. You—I hardly knew you!"

The exquisite transparent skin flushed; Ariel shrugged in the old indifferent way.

"Oh, well——"

"Oh, well, naturally!" Gail finished it for her with a laugh.

"We have light?" Ariel asked, as her sister touched a switch and the kitchen was flooded with brilliance.

"We've had it a year."

Ariel saw the basket and the baby; she gave Gail a frightened glance.

"Gail!"

"Oh, no, no. That's Phil's baby. Lily's baby."

Ariel's proud mouth curled in the old haughty way.

"I heard he had married her," she said, displeased, and there was a little pause.

"She's awfully nice, really," Gail protested, feeling as if a fall of cold water had suddenly enveloped her.

"Oh, how can you say so! That horrible Wibser!" Ariel said impatiently. Suddenly they were back in their old relationship, and there was reproof in the voice in which Gail said:

"Be careful, Ariel! She isn't here, but Phil may be any minute."

"They're living here!"

"They have been, from the first."

"But this is our house!" Ariel exclaimed, head in air.

"Oh, Ariel *dear*——" Gail pleaded, patiently.

"Do you mean to tell me that Joe Cass's divorced wife——"

"Joe Cass died, Ariel. And they were here," Gail said, as the other voice stopped on an indignant note—"they were here when Edith—— And they've been here ever since," she added, after another pause.

"I see," Ariel said, in a gentle, lowered tone. The old hoarse, boyish voice, and the old penitent look in the hazel eyes—how they brought back the days of long ago!

"Is Dick with you, Ariel?"

"Is——?" Ariel was looking about the kitchen; she seemed to have fallen into a dream.

"Is Dick here?"

"Dick? Oh, yes! He's coming in with the bags."

"And are you going to stay in Clippersville?"

"Are we——? Oh, heavens, no!" Ariel said expressively.

"But you are happy, darling?"

The younger sister had seated herself at the table, her bag and gloves had been flung there; now she loosened her winter coat.

"Nothing to cable home about, collect," she answered drily. Something seemed to shrivel in Gail's heart at the tone.

"Can we announce your marriage now, Ariel?"

Instead of answering Ariel fastened bright curious eyes on her sister.

"Do you mean to say that nobody's ever suspected?"

"Nobody."

"Oh, come now, Gail!"

"Well, it surprised me. Of course I told Lily. But she never told even her mother. And people have all taken it for granted that you were down in Los Angeles with Aunt Annie Ralston's family. They didn't question it—not one half as much as I thought they would. I think they still think of you as a child, rather than a woman—someone to be sent around and schooled. I don't know. Anyway, if anyone has ever connected your name with Dick Stebbins's I never heard it. His mother never did. Or if she did she was as mum as I was about it."

"I've often wondered," Ariel said, listening attentively. "Not," she added, with her own little favorite air of arrogance—"not that it made any difference to *me!* But I've often wondered what the old ladies in town were thinking about it."

There was a moment's silence, for Gail sensed something unexpressed in her sister's tone and waited, puzzled, for an explanation.

"I'm terribly glad——" Ariel began hesitatingly. "Gail!" she added, suddenly, on a more definite note. "I've got to tell you something—it's going to surprise you." She fell silent.

"You must have *known* that there was something funny about all this?" she interrupted the pause to ask irrelevantly.

There was a sound behind Gail at the kitchen doorway. She turned and faced Dick Stebbins.

Bigger, browner, with more of that sweet, homely, kindly air than ever. Some quality, reliable, trustworthy, restful, seemed to emanate from him; there was infinite strength for Gail in the mere touch of his big hand. He kissed her, very simply, and looked beyond her to Ariel. Gail, blue-aproned, tawny of hair, her thick eyebrows drawn together questioningly, her sapphire eyes and the disciplined sweet wide mouth accenting her feeling of bewilderment and non-comprehension, sent her glance from one face to the other.

"Had your talk?" Dick asked, and the remembered voice sent waves of thrilling weakness and joy and pain through Gail's whole being.

"Not yet," Ariel said. "Tell her. Tell her the truth, Dick."

CHAPTER XXIII

DICK had brought two rain-spattered suitcases into the kitchen. Now Ariel glanced from them to her sister's face.

"First," she said, "you can put me up, Gail?"

"Put you up!" Gail echoed, in an almost shocked tone. "But, darling, this is home! Papa's old room is the guest room, anyway."

"I didn't know but what there were a thousand Wibsers here!" Ariel said. And instantly the years were obliterated, and it was the old petulant, unreasonable Ariel being soothed by the old patient Gail.

"Not quite a thousand!" Gail said with a gallant laugh. "You and Dick can have the guest room all to yourselves, anyway."

"I'd rather double up with you," Ariel said, without embarrassment, but with an appealing little touch of shyness.

"Well——" Gail colored to her forehead, laughing again, and sending Dick an apologetic glance. "If you don't mind?" she said. "Of course we have to talk all night."

"There's a man in town I have to see, anyway," Dick answered immediately.

"But not to-night!"

"Well, I thought I'd go down to the Empire and telephone him, anyway."

"Dick Stebbins! Not this first night. To-morrow's Sunday, anyway. And Phil will be here any minute."

"He has to," Ariel contributed definitely.

"What? See somebody *to-night?*"

"Willoughby—he's the attorney for these ship people," Dick explained.

"Oh, yes, I know him. Mrs. Cantor's father. But he's quite sick, Dick—she was telling me yesterday in the library. He's in the hospital."

"I know he is. But you see," Dick persisted uncomfortably, with a red face, "it'll be better for me to be at the hotel, because then if he gets better—we've been working on this case together——"

"But, my dear," Gail said in her big-sisterly tone, "you can't go to the Empire, and leave Ariel here! You know what Clippersville is; there'd be any amount of talk! What does the illness of a casual stranger like Mr. Willoughby matter?"

There was a pause. Then Ariel, balanced on the edge of the kitchen table in the old fashion, said explanatorily, "Mr. Willoughby and Dick have been working on this case together. And if he goes to London, Dick'll probably go too!"

"Oh, children, London!" Gail exclaimed, diverted, her eyes dancing.

"Well, not if he doesn't get well," Dick tempered it.

"But tell me—before the others come in—before anything else," Gail said, "you're going to announce your marriage now, aren't you?" Something odd in their silence bewildered her, and she turned sharply to Ariel. "Aren't you going to announce it even now?" she demanded.

"Immediately," Ariel agreed briefly.

"Well, then! Then surely Dick ought to stay here!"

Gail argued. Her keen look moved from face to face. "There isn't any trouble?" she asked quickly.

Dick came over to her, and put an arm about her.

"No, dear, there's no trouble," he said reassuringly: "but there's a good deal of a mix-up, and Ariel and I want you to know all about it. So you and she have a talk, and I'll go down to the hotel."

"But I don't understand," Gail said slowly.

An odd look that was half a smile came into Dick's face, and he turned toward the door.

"You have your talk," he said. "And I'll be back. Of course I want to see Phil. You don't know what it is to get home. I can't wait to start talking."

"If it's nice Sunday we'll take our lunch up to the dam!" Gail called after him gaily. But when the kitchen door was shut and the car in the side yard had chugged away, there was no laughter in the puzzled look she turned toward Ariel. "What's—queer?" she asked.

"Nothing's queer," Ariel said in her proud, faintly hoarse voice. "But your cramming me and Dick into one room was rather funny," she said slowly, airily, "because we aren't married, not the way you think—not any more."

"You and Dick aren't married!"

"Certainly not," Ariel said, with a faint hint of a sigh, a yawn, a shrug. "We never cared for each other—that way."

"You and Dick Stebbins aren't *married!"*

"I said we weren't, Gail."

"Then—then——" Gail stopped short, and there was utter silence in the kitchen. "Divorced," she said. "Then who's been supporting you all these years, Ariel?" she demanded seizing at random the first of a hundred questions.

"Dick," the other girl said airily.

Gail's honest face reddened; she spoke sharply.

"What are you talking about!"

"Oh, not what you think, and what all Clippersville would gladly think!" Ariel answered. "He never put a finger tip on me," she said proudly. "He despises me, I think. Not—not that I care!"

Gail's whole manner changed. She was once again her tender self.

"Tell me, dear," she said patiently.

Ariel also softened suddenly. She spoke coldly, with a sort of proud reluctance and on a long sigh.

"What you never knew, Gail, and Ede never knew was that I had fallen in love with Van Murchison!"

Gail looked at her, puzzled.

"Was he—has he been in Los Angeles?"

"I mean when he was here in Clippersville, Gail."

"You mean——!"

"Yes. While you and he were going about together. I couldn't help it; in fact I didn't know it," Ariel confessed dispassionately, her hazel eyes narrowed. "I just went nutty—gaga—about him!" she said.

"Did he know it?"

"Wait." Ariel paused. "Do you remember a Saturday," she began again suddenly—"a Saturday when you were going over to Los Gatos with Van, and you'd sort of—sort of maneuvered to get away from the library?"

Remember it! How often, with shame and regret, Gail had remembered that old undignified juggling with business and home obligations, just to get free for those exciting, unsatisfying week-ends with Van!

"Yes, I remember. It was hot. And you came down to the car and said good-bye to us."

"Well, while you were in the house he kissed me," Ariel said.

The indignant color blazed in Gail's face.

"He didn't!"

"Oh, indeed he did." Ariel reflected for a second, and then added, "I made him."

"Oh, darling, darling, if I'd only known! For I was getting so tired of the whole thing then. You could have had him! You could have gone to Los Gatos——"

"Well, anyway," Ariel said, when Gail paused, "he said to me, 'What chance Del Monte to-night?'

"I said, 'I thought you were going to be in Los Gatos?'

" 'No,' he said. 'Some of the fellows and I are going over to Del Monte late, for the golf.' I said there was no chance at all, and you came out with your coat."

"I remember! I went back for my coat."

"Well. Anyway, it was very hot and stupid, and Dorothy Camp, Larry, and Buddy Raisch came 'round and asked me to go over to somebody's yacht in Santa Cruz. I'd told you, you know, that I wouldn't go 'round with that crowd, but Dot said her mother would be there, and it was so hot, and I had nothing to do. So I left a note for Ede, and went off with them.

"Do you remember," she went on, thinking it out, "that after we'd had lunch we passed a sign that said 'Del Monte 38 Miles,' and the boys teased us to go down there for dinner and dance? I thought of Van then—I knew he'd be there.

"And such a funny feeling came over me, Gail. It was just as if—I knew. It was just as if I knew that if we went to Monterey all the rest would happen.

"Well, we went down there, and we got rooms in a small hotel in Monterey; we said just to brush up in, but I think Dot and I thought we might spend the night there. We took the Seventeen-Mile Drive, and had dinner at Pebble Beach, and it was all *right*—except that my heart kept pounding and pounding, as if something was going to happen—as if I knew.

"Buddy and Larry drank too much, and that made us mad, and we didn't quite know what to do. But about ten o'clock, when we were all over at Del Monte, I left the others and went to the desk and asked if Mr. Van Murchison was there. It gave me such a funny feeling when the man said yes, that he had just registered.

"I telephoned upstairs to his room, and said, 'Well, I'm here.'

"He was awfully nice, and said he was coming down to dance. But when he came down Buddy was acting so badly that I was terribly embarrassed, and Dot and Larry had disappeared. Van was wonderful.

"He told me that I had no business to be there, of course, and he said that if it wasn't for the tournament the next day he'd drive me all the way back to Clippersville that night. But as it was, he said I must go to the hotel and lock my door—I remember I got a great thrill out of his scolding me!—and go straight home the next day, and give persons like Buddy and Larry a wide berth in future."

"But he wouldn't give up the tournament to bring you home? I see," Gail said drily, with a deep sigh.

"You know Van!" Ariel said with a shrug. She was silent awhile. "I really loved him." She added the words thoughtfully, as if thinking aloud.

"He said he would take me to Monterey, Gail, only a mile away. But it was a brilliant night—you never saw such stars!—and first we went out past the Presidio to Cypress Point, and we parked the car and went down to the shore.

"Van told me he loved me, and I said that I loved him, and we were engaged. There's—there's no other excuse for it, Gail. . . .

"Except," she said, in a dead silence, "that we'd both been drinking—not too much, but enough to make everything seem unreal and—oh, I don't know—unimportant. If I thought at all—if I thought at all, I thought that nothing mattered! Anything was better than being an old maid, like the Foster girls.

"You and Edith never knew that, did you?"

"Knew it!" Gail said, on a breath of agony.

Ariel was silent for a full minute; neither sister spoke. The old kitchen clock ticked solemnly; rain pattered on the porch roof.

"Yes. But—but I wasn't eighteen!" Ariel said, in her hoarse, appealing voice. "Larry had been mixing those horrible things that he called highballs!" she suddenly added fretfully.

"You weren't eighteen," Gail said heavily, swallowing with a stiff throat, "but you knew better than that."

The other girl seemed to wilt suddenly. She looked away.

"Oh, yes, I knew better than that. A girl is born knowing better than that!" she conceded dully.

"And *you* despise Lily!" Gail muttered, trembling.

The resentful color stung in Ariel's face.

"She's *common,*" she said quickly.

"But she didn't do what you did!" Gail wanted to say. No use. No use. She was silent.

"I'm sorry!" Ariel said then impatiently, in the tone she always used when it was too late. "I'm not proud of myself! But—but it happens all the time," she added resentfully, "and girls get away with it."

"Ariel! Don't talk that way," Gail commanded, with an angry flash of blue eyes.

"It's true," Ariel murmured, subdued. "And my mother died when I was only a baby," she added.

"That's not fair!"

The younger girl flushed with honest shame.

"No. I suppose it's not."

"You didn't," Gail began, thinking—"you didn't marry Dick Stebbins that Christmas, not telling him?"

"No," Ariel said, with an indignant look.

"He knew?"

"Everything!"

"And loved you in spite of it?"

"He got me out of it," Ariel said.

"And did you stop caring for Van afterward?"

"You don't understand," Ariel said. "Dick and I never were married. We aren't married now! For nearly three years I've been married to Van. That's the marriage we're going to announce."

Gail stared at her, stricken dumb.

"That's what I couldn't write you," Ariel added simply.

"You and Van Murchison married!"

"Yes—in Los Angeles. The February after I went away."

"But then, Ariel—Ariel, why did you run away with Dick! Did you make him think you cared for him! He wrote Phil, after all. He said that you were going to get a license—you *had* gotten a license."

"We got a license, yes. But you'll have to let me tell it the way it happened, Gail.

"Van took me back to the Monterey hotel that night," she resumed, finding her words slowly. "And he kissed me good-bye, and said that he would always love me, and that I belonged to him. I believed him. I was all excited, but not ashamed—not one bit unhappy, Gail. I thought that there was something heroic about it.

"Dot didn't come in until after I did, and of course I didn't give her any hint. But we talked things over, and decided that we'd get up early the next day and give the boys the slip. We were wild at them!

"But the next morning, while we were figuring it out how we'd get home, and we'd gone over to the bus to see what time it would leave, Buddy and Larry found us. They'd shaved and straightened up; they seemed quite sober, but I suppose they both had hangovers. At any rate they said that they were sorry and asked us to forgive them, and said they'd drive us home quietly and the whole thing would blow over.

"I was—well, of course I hadn't slept all night, but it was a sort of pleasant excitement, too; I felt—sort of swimming, in emotion, you know, and I said I'd like to watch the Pebble Beach golf for a little while, so we went there. Van was there, looking stunning of course, and terribly sweet; and we had a few words together.

"I wanted to get home and get rested, and have things go back to normal. So we started at about twelve, and then—then of course the accident came. Dorothy had left us, and I was driving.

"I thought Van would come to me the minute he heard. But he didn't. He stayed away—I thought I would lose my mind, worrying and thinking and wondering if *that* would come out in the evidence, too—where I'd been from midnight until two o'clock Saturday night.

"And then when he did show up in court he would only laugh, and I couldn't get him back to that mood—the way he'd been at Cypress Point—and he didn't say anything about an engagement.

"Once, when I said something, he hushed me up as if he were scared even to think about it, and said his stepfather would cut him off without a cent if he ever dreamed of it! He said that the main thing was to keep out of jail."

Gail could hear him. She could remember the ethereal little Ariel of three years ago; she remembered the casual, laughing Van. Ariel struggling with the saddest problem any woman ever knows—youth, faith, gaiety, security wiped away at a blow—and Van noisily jovial over her whispers, her asides, her anxious smiles and too-ready tears.

"You see, almost from the first, Gail, I knew what had happened. It wasn't the Hetty Sorrel business. I was sure. Ten days after that trial I knew what I was facing. And he didn't even like me; he didn't come near me. I telephoned, I sent notes, but he wouldn't come. You and Ede were so pleased that the trial had sort of—exonerated me, and that I was sobering down. I saw it, and everyone was so happy, making plans. Dorothy well and safe and talking about going East for Christmas, and all the time—this tiger tearing at me."

"You poor little thing!" It was the first note of sympathy that had come into Gail's voice, and Ariel answered it by a quick blinking of filling eyes.

"It was all my own doing, Gail!"

"Isn't it always?" Gail asked slowly.

Those had been happy days for her. Days in which she had discovered Dick, discovered her own heart. And all the time the little sister had been walking in the shadows deeper than death, beside her.

"You can't think what it was," Ariel said. "It's—well, there seems to you to be just two classes of women in the world. The girls who are—in trouble, and the ones who aren't! And no others. And you say to yourself, 'If I ever get out—if I ever get out——' "

"I can imagine!"

"I told Van. I didn't know what else to do! He didn't believe me, or he said he didn't," Ariel resumed. "And the next thing I knew someone told me calmly that he'd gone East. There was just one thing, Gail——" She paused. "Just one thing that kept me from killing myself," she added. "And that was you."

"Me!"

"You. You kept talking about how we had all to hang together, and get through the hard years, and carve out our destinies for ourselves. You and Ede were always celebrating the house's birthday, and insisting on—oh, well, butter balls and everything. And I just couldn't do it! I *couldn't* shame and hurt you that way.

"The day after Van left I told Dorothy. And she said what he said, that she didn't think it was true. But they went away too, Gail. She must have told her mother, and do you remember that Mrs. Camp took Dorothy East to school, right away?"

"Beasts!" Gail whispered, looking away.

"Dorothy only laughed about it," Ariel stammered, with a memory of that youthful agony and shame flushing her cheeks again.

"Laughed!"

"So then I had nobody, Gail. I couldn't tell you or Edith; I was afraid to tell Phil! I went to see old Dr. Somers, and he only said that he would rather have seen one of my father's children dead than have to tell her what he had to tell me!"

"Ariel—you poor child!"

"Van didn't answer my letters, and time kept going on, Gail, and I had no money! I couldn't get away, and I couldn't stay home.

"And then I thought of Dick, and that maybe if I was nice to him he would want to marry me right away—in time."

She laughed bitterly, fell silent again.

"What a fool I was!" she said. "But he didn't. He was wonderful, but he didn't care—that way.

"And then Christmas week came, and Dick was going on Christmas afternoon to Los Angeles, on a case for three weeks, and I wondered if he could get me a job, any kind of a job. So I went to his office—and I told him the whole story.

"He was wonderful! He never said a word of blame; the only thing he seemed to think of was how to get me out, and how to spare you and Ede and Phil. He adores our family, of course.

"He said that since I was a minor a very serious charge could be brought against Van. At first I wouldn't consider that. But he talked me over, and he composed a letter to Van, as my 'lawyer,' and sent it off that afternoon, a few days before Christmas, a few days before my eighteenth birthday. And Dick told me just to keep quiet and not worry, and that he would keep working at it, and it would all come out all right.

"Van wouldn't write me, ever, through the Clippersville Post Office, for fear we'd be discovered. We had rented a box in the Greenvale Post Office, and I used to take the trolley over there and ask for letters. And during this Christmas week I went over and there was a letter—from Van.

"I had written him that I was sure, now. But he didn't say anything about that. He just said that he was not going back to college, but that his father had staked him to a year's trip around the world, and he and his chum were going.

"Gail, it went through my heart like a bullet. As long as I live I'll never forget that post office at Greenville, on a cold, quiet winter day, with everyone shopping up and down the main street, and evergreen in the windows."

"You should have wired his mother!" Gail said passionately. "You oughtn't to have let him get away with it!"

"Gail, she knew, of course."

"She couldn't!"

"Of course she did!"

The older sister was silent, sickened by the badness of the world.

"Van had simply—as far as *she* cared," Ariel said—"simply gotten a Clippersville girl into trouble!"

"I can't bear it!" Gail whispered, hands over her face. "Not when it's *you!"*

"Gail, do you know that I never felt—*bad."*

Gail reddened in embarrassment.

"I know what you mean."

"I mean," Ariel said, "that I loved him—I *did* care. I was carried away; I'd never loved anyone before!

"But what I did feel, Gail, was fury. Fury at myself for being such a fool! Like some cheap little factory worker—like a servant girl. Why, the servant girls have more sense! I could have torn myself to pieces, having Van smile and go his way, and Dorothy and her mother clear out."

"You have a child, Ariel?"

"Wait. Well, I lay awake all that night of Christmas Eve, after we had come back from church, and I thought and thought—how to get away, what to do! And it seemed to me that I was going raving mad—I was, too. I thought the people in church were looking at me, and I knew you and Edith would find out, long before they did.

"And then quite suddenly, peacefully, I made up my mind to go away with Dick, to make you think we were eloping. I thought that if Van sent for me I could tell you then, and if he didn't Dick would fix some way out!

"I got up at four and packed my bag and dragged it down and shut it in the old woodshed. And that afternoon, when you thought I had gone to Miss Vail's, I went out and waited for the trolley, and took the bus to San José, and bought myself a ticket to Gilroy. That was as far as my money would go.

"After the train was started I walked all through it, and I found Dick talking to a man, and he came right back with me, and I told him what I'd done!"

"And was he wild?"

"Wild? Oh, no! He said that he thought I had done right. He was wonderful!"

Gail's eyes flashed darkly blue.

"Dick——" she breathed.

"He said he thought it was the right thing to do. And he said not to worry, and that he would arrange everything the next day. He asked me if I had anything with me, and I said Oh, yes, my suitcase. So I took his berth and he sat up all night—thinking, he said."

The havoc she had left behind her, the havoc she had wrought in his life, had meant nothing to her then, and meant nothing to her now.

"He didn't mind," she said vaguely.

"We were going to be married the next day, Wednesday," she presently added. "But you can't do that down there. Dick wrote you that we were getting a license, and we did. But we couldn't get married, not for several days, and meanwhile Van wired, wired to Los Angeles. You see, he'd had Dick's letter, and it was true that he was going around the world, but by Panama. He wired that he would be in Los Angeles in sixteen days, and would see Dick.

"Then Dick said it would be much better to wait and see Van. To make sure, he cabled the ship in Havana. And Van cabled back, 'All right.' He was afraid of being arrested, on account of my being so young.

"Dick had to go to San Diego and to San Pedro. But I just waited at the boarding house. It was horribly dull for me, and I didn't seem any nearer the movies than ever.

"Van's ship got in and we were married, and Dick and I swore that nobody should ever know. I hated him, then; I didn't want to marry him at all. But Dick said he would start legal proceedings.

"So we were married, and Van went on, on the next ship, and nobody knew. Dick had to go to Las Vegas for months; but he sent me money every month, and if he was in town he'd come see me and take me to a movie or something. And I got work to do—you don't have much chance in the movies. But I got a start—Ariel Adair they called me—only I didn't like it much. It's all right for the stars, but I never would have been one. So I got small parts with a stock company. We played Hollywood and Venice and Glendale and Pasadena. That was kind of fun.

"And then last year, when Murchison's Mills failed, Van came to Los Angeles again, settling things, and he came to see me. He told me that he had never looked at another girl, and he wanted to have me go back East with him. But then it was my time to say No," Ariel ended with a little curl of her lip.

"But you haven't told me, darling. What happened to you? Were you ill?"

"Oh, yes—or not so terribly ill. They said it was all wrong from the very beginning—it never would have been a healthy baby!" Ariel said. "They said it was lucky it died."

Motherhood. The magic word, the magic estate of which Gail had dreamed. She was silent from sheer shock, sheer inability to speak.

"Anyway, I was in a hospital for three weeks, in a ward," Ariel went on bitterly.

"That was when?"

"February. While Dick was in Phoenix. He had cases all over everywhere. And I was taken ill very suddenly, and hadn't much money."

"You poor kid!"

"All that made me feel that I never wanted to see Van Murchison again. But he was having his hard times, too. Everything was crashing, and he was working hard in the New Jersey plant to save what he could. He's there now.

"When he came out last year we had lots of long talks, and in a way he did what he could. He said he knew he had behaved terribly, but that he was a spoiled kid."

She was not very angry at him, even now. Gail saw, with a sort of stupefaction, that what the great Murchison did was still sacred, still above criticism, to Ariel.

"Finally we arranged it that if he went back and got a good start, with these people who have bought the mills," she resumed, "then I'd come on and we'd announce our marriage. And that's what has happened."

"You're on your way East now?"

"He meets me in Chicago next week."

A pause. Then Gail said, "You still love him, Ariel?"

"I don't love the idea of living in New Jersey," Ariel said, after a brief pause.

"But you're not unhappy?"

The old bored, haughty look.

"Oh, no," Ariel drawled. "But mind you, I was as much to blame as he!" she added with sudden force.

Gail mused on the whole story, her eyes on her sister's face, tumult in her heart, and the drum-drum-drum of the rain falling softly on the porch roof.

"You came here just to announce it?"

"Not exactly. Dick thought I ought to come home and explain."

"Was Dick at your boarding house?"

"Not even that!" Ariel said, with her scornful little laugh. "I tell you he never so much as put a finger tip on me!"

"But you saw him all the time?"

"Off and on. He wasn't in Los Angeles much. But he would turn up and ask me if I had money enough."

"What a friend!" Gail said under her breath.

Ariel made no response. She was looking about the old kitchen.

"I *can* stay here, Gail, in spite of the Wibser tribe?"

"Darling, of course! And they're not such a tribe," Gail answered, laughing with a touch of hurt and reproach. "Just Lily and the boys. And look—this is the baby. This is Gail."

"They named her Gail!"

"Lily would have it."

"You might know she'd take your name, Gail. I suppose she's more a Lawrence than us Lawrences!"

To this Gail could make no reply. She said tactfully, "It's quarter to seven, Ariel, and it looks as if either Phil had to be at the shop to-night, or had gone to Lily's mother's. You and I'll have dinner anyway. Oh—and my Directors' Meeting!" she exclaimed suddenly.

"What Directors' Meeting?"

"At the library."

"Oh, well," Ariel said indifferently, as Gail ran to make telephone apologies. "Were they nasty?" she asked when Gail came back.

"Lovely. Francis Wilcox is always awfully nice. And by the way, they have a boy, Ariel. Really a darling little fellow, though they dress him like Lord Fauntleroy, of course.

"Don't you remember, the Wilcoxes kept losing babies?" she asked, as Ariel looked perfectly blank.

"Did you tell them I was here?" Ariel asked, after a shake of the head and an indifferent shrug.

"Just that. But what a buzz when the marriage is announced!" Gail said, with a sort of mild awe. "Let's go upstairs, Ariel."

Ariel sat on at the table, a mutinous, dark look gathering in her eyes.

"Everything's changed, and I miss Edith!" she burst out suddenly, laying her head on her locked hands and beginning to cry.

Gail came over to her, and bent down to crook an arm about Ariel's bowed head. Her own eyes were brimming.

CHAPTER XXIV

Afterward they went upstairs, through the familiar halls and past the familiar doors, to talk desultorily, inconsequentially, of anything and everything. When a wail from the kitchen took Gail down there again on flying feet, Ariel, bare-headed and looking young, small, and tired again, came too, and then Lily, Phil, and the boys came in and there was a babel and confusion in which somehow Gail and Ariel managed a cup of tea.

But when Gail went upstairs after dinner, supposedly to superintend the little boys' retiring, it was to be noted that she remained there some additional moments. When she came down she wore her newest gown, a simple, thin black velvet gown that left her slender brown arms bare and fell away in a long line from the straight column of her throat and the curve of her young breast. At the throat there was golden old lace, her mother's lace, and Gail wore to-night her mother's old cameo ring.

The tawny locks that had been bobbed three years ago were longer now and gathered in a cluster of curls at the nape of her neck. Gail rarely showed any color, but to-night there was a subdued sparkle and shine about her; her wide sweet mouth was burning scarlet, her sapphire eyes starry.

Phil, Lily, Sam, Ariel—they all sat in the room that had once been the lesser drawing room but that now had been changed into a living room. The fireplace was opened, and logs crackled there. The boys' blocks and books were stored on the shelves, and a ring of comfortable shabby old chairs circled the hearth.

Lily only listened to-night. She was a good deal older than Ariel, but she seemed a little afraid of her. Gail was rather silent too. She sat, slender, thoughtful, and tawny-headed, at Phil's knee on a cushion. Her square shoulders rested against her brother, her square fingers were locked, her eyes thoughtful, and her full underlip slightly bitten.

Sam drafted for to-morrow afternoon's *Challenge* the announcement that would take all Clippersville by surprise. Little Ariel Lawrence, Mrs. Vance Murchison. Ariel, listening, correcting, appeared the least concerned of the five.

There was a step at the side door, a gust of rain-sweet air penetrated to the sitting room. Gail had known this must come. She did not stir, except to raise her eyes to Dick Stebbins as he came in.

Phil did most of the talking. Dick talked, too, to Lily—to all of them except Gail. To her he did not speak directly until the clock struck ten and she got to her feet.

"Ariel, you must go to bed. You must be dead. Come on!"

"Are you coming back, Gail?" said Dick then, with a glance.

"I think not. We'll be talking," Gail said, with a smile, "all night."

"To-morrow I'll have to hang around the hospital, in the hope of seeing poor Willoughby."

"If he died, Dick," Phil asked, "would that kind of throw the monkey wrench into your plans?"

"Well, in a way. There are two or three other propositions I could follow up," Dick answered, unruffled.

He was the old Dick, and he was a new Dick, too. A quiet big man, very sure of himself. His manner, his voice were more authoritative than they had been. He had not worn a big belted coat three years ago, nor jammed big gloves into its pockets.

"Willoughby is doing the London work for his Eastern firm," he said. "And there was some talk of my going with him."

"If you didn't, might you practise here, Dick?" This was Gail.

"I don't think so—not in Clippersville," he answered decidedly. "International law, you know . . .

"Seen *Caravan?*" he demanded abruptly, looking at Gail.

"You mean the big musical comedy?"

"Yep."

"No, I haven't. It's playing in Oakland to-morrow."

"I noticed that," said Dick. "Want to go up?"

They were all looking on, suddenly awakened, suddenly aware of the situation. But she could not see anything but the lean, homely, kindly face that was smiling—just the hint of a smile—at her.

"I'd love it!" she said.

The great news rocked Clippersville breakfast tables the next morning, and Gail, walking to the library in the delicious autumn freshness after the rain, was assailed on all sides.

"The family knew she was married," Gail said, over and over again, hoping that this was not stretching the truth to the breaking point. "But they were both so young—and Van had no prospects—and then that unfortunate business of the bankruptcy came."

But Ariel's marriage was in second place for her. She was thinking all the while that it was now almost nine o'clock, and that in eight hours Dick Stebbins was coming to the house to take her off for dinner and the theater in Oakland, thirty-five miles away.

She did not have to wait so long to see him. At about ten o'clock he walked into the library and came up to the desk. Gail saw his hulking figure in the entrance arcade, and her heart turned over completely, and the hand that was resting on her desk blotter trembled.

When he stood before her she reached both hands across the high desk.

"Dick, we couldn't say much before Lily last night. She's not to know everything. But how are we going to thank you for standing by Ariel, for saving her?"

"Why, that was all right!" he said, laughing a little awkwardly, flushing warmly.

"Ariel's only a child still, Dick; she can't appreciate it. But Phil and I do—I do, from the bottom of my heart!"

"I guess you know why I did it," he wanted to say. "I guess you know I was glad to do it!" was what she heard.

"That doesn't make it any less!" she told him.

"It's a nice town to get back to," he said, after awhile. "On a morning like this, with everything washed fresh and cool, there's something awfully friendly about it."

"And how's poor Mr. Willoughby?"

"Not so good."

"Mrs. Cantor," Gail said seriously, "told me that he had been told by the finest New York doctors that he would simply have to stop drinking and eating the way he was."

Dick listened respectfully to this and other Clippersville revelations. He had all his old simple, keen interest in Gail's point of view; he was especially concerned and amused over her reports of Lily and Ariel.

"They don't like each other?"

"Well, they're polite. But they have nothing in common!"

"No," he conceded, deeply struck, "I suppose not.

"But Lily makes Phil happy?" he asked anxiously, more than once.

"Oh, utterly! He's mad about her."

"And that's a cute baby!" Dick said, in satisfaction.

The autumn sun shone, and only the occasional fall of a yellow leaf through the crystal air indicated that the month was October and not May. The hills were transparent blue gauze, all about the canyon and the dam, when the Lawrences took their lunch up there on a hot clear Sunday afternoon. Gail and Dick walked up the creek bed alone, after the meal, and saw the dragonflies shoot from hot dry rock to hot dry rock, and saw the stream, muddy from early rains, churn itself into foam in the narrowed currents and spread in still pools over the shale.

Dick gave her a big, firm hand to help her when the path was rocky or steep; both their faces were flushed and damp when they sat down presently on a great fallen redwood, up in the sweet shadowy woods, and smiled at each other.

"Gail," said Dick then, "do you know that you have grown to be the most beautiful woman in the world?"

Her blue eyes deepened oddly, like summer water touched by cloud shadow.

"If you say so——" she stammered, finding her voice with difficulty.

Neither one could seem to speak again. Dick stood up, and after a second Gail got to her feet too, and turned as if she would have gone back down the trail.

"I guess you know what I've come back for, Gail," Dick said then. "You've always been the only woman in the world for me. But to come back and find you—what you've grown to be—with all the town—everyone—more or less in love with you——"

He stopped, for Gail had come up close to him and was holding out her hands. Dick put his big arms about her, and crushed her against his heart, and they kissed each other.

It was half an hour after that first, deep kiss that shouts from the deserted party at the dam brought them back down the trail. Their hands were linked as they followed the rushing stream back; it was four o'clock on an October afternoon, the sun was already sinking.

Hot light poured through the thinning foliage, and lay graciously among the red, twisted madrone branches, and on the shafts of the redwoods. The birds were all still now, but bees went by like bullets, and here and there bright-winged flies buzzed in weaving columns in the sun.

"And all that time—all that time, Dick, you cared?"

"Yep. But I didn't know it was going to be all that time," he said honestly. "It—sort of—went on, from day to day."

"I knew I cared," the girl said seriously.

Suddenly the two stopped on the rough trail and smiled at each other.

"This all seems like a dream," Dick confessed.

Sun-browned, her tawny hair in a little disorder, her blue eyes bright, she stood looking up at him without speaking—her man, the man who was to take care of her, and stand by her, and love her, all her days. Some flash of the coming miracle of their love and companionship struck them both, and their awed, almost bewildered glances met and clung together.

"Dick, after all these years—after all the other girls—it's so strange to think of myself as engaged!"

"It's strange to me to think that, at last——" He stopped on a brief, odd little laugh. "That at last I've gotten Gail Lawrence!" Dick finished it boyishly.

"It's all so strange," Gail mused, her fingers clinging to his, the glory and beauty of the autumn woods about them. "I'll be Mrs. Richard Stebbins!" she said.

"Gosh!" the big man said, smiling down at her, small and square and tawny-headed, flushed with walking, radiant in this exquisite hour of fulfillment.

"It's all come out like a story," Gail decided contentedly. She jerked her head, with a sudden little touch of self-consciousness, toward the unseen picnickers. "They know," she said, with an abashed grin.

"I don't know why they know," Dick answered, surprised.

"Oh, they do! But let's have it—ours, for just a little while," the girl pleaded. "Let's not tell them today, anyway."

"You're the boss," Dick agreed, as they went on.

The others were making preparations for departure. It was four o'clock. Gail gave no sign as she began to help gather sweaters and cups; Dick said nothing. But Lily shot Phil a significant glance, accompanied by a brief nod, and Phil went up at once to his sister and caught her by the arm and turned her about.

Gail's innocent inquiring glance changed guiltily, and she laughed, the rare hot color spreading over her face. In another second Phil had given a great shout, and Gail was laughing and crying in his arms, and Lily, leaping over her amazed children, had run to embrace Dick wildly.

After that everyone laughed and shouted. It was Ariel who was the most surprised; entirely taken aback.

"But Dick Stebbins, Gail," she said later, in a faintly complaining tone, in the privacy of their own room. "He—after all, his father was our father's—well, foreman! Employee!"

"Ariel, you little fool!" Gail answered with a joyous laugh. She was too happy to quarrel.

"Well, after all, birth *does* count," Ariel said discontentedly.

But Gail was too much absorbed in her own thoughts to hear her.

If Mr. Willoughby lived, then Dick would duly depart with him in a few weeks' time, and instead of following up the London offer would establish himself somewhere in the East, possibly in Washington.

If his superior died, Dick would go East at once, and follow the same course.

In either case he and Gail would be married in—say eight months.

"Call it a year. It's safer, Dick."

"Eight months. Maybe six."

"That would be April or May!"

"April or May."

He came soberly into the library, ten days after the picnic, to tell her that old Willoughby had quietly slipped away.

Gail's face paled a little.

"So it's no London?"

"No London."

"After all your work, Dick!"

"Oh, that! It'll come in, somehow, some day."

"But it does mean a fresh start?"

"In a way it does. But the thing I mind is leaving you."

"No help for it!" she said gallantly.

"I suppose not."

"I have something, you know," she said hopefully, after a pause. "Phil is fixing it all up now. Ariel wants money, and Sam and I would as soon wait. So it looks as if we might get the ranch, he and I, and he says he'd like to live there and farm it, and put out twenty acres of table berries. If he does, even though it might be some time . . . And then there's *The Bells of Saint Giles!*" she added, in increasing hope. Dick laughed.

"It'll all work out," he said, following the laugh with a faint frown. "But—it isn't just what I wanted to offer you, my darling."

The last word fluttered her senses, and she laughed excitedly.

"Besides, there may be a miracle!" she said.

Dick looked into the honest, shining, loving blue eyes so near his own, and lightly touched the square, capable hand.

"*You're* the miracle!" he said.

The phrase was destined to become a household word. For it was but a few days later that Dick came to the Lawrence house to dinner, late, and handed a telegram to Gail across the rice muffins and the old blue milk pitcher and the glass bowl of pink October roses.

"Read it out loud."

Dazedly, she obeyed. It was signed "George G. Leavitt."

"We would be glad if you could arrange to take Paul Willoughby's place, assuming full responsibility for London office. Can offer you assistant if desired. We are holding *Aquitania* reservations for November fifteenth pending your reply.

"Dick!" She swallowed hard. "What does it mean?"

"It means being picked out of the ranks, and handed a field marshal's commission!" Dick said in a voice that shook.

"Congratulations!" Phil said, his handsome Lawrence face one glow of pride and satisfaction.

"But Dick—Dick—can you?" Gail stammered. "I mean—are you sure? Without—without——"

"There's one thing I can't do it without!" Dick admitted, folding the telegram to put it back into his breast pocket.

"Money?" Sam asked.

"Nope." Dick looked at Gail, and all the others laughed. "I won't do it without my wife," he said simply.

"But gosh!" This was Sam again. "You'd have to be married right off!" he said.

Dick said nothing. He looked at Gail.

"Gail could be married to-morrow, and get out like a fire horse!" Lily said, and they all laughed.

It was exciting. It was exciting. Things were happening fast and furiously to the Lucky Lawrences at last.

Miss Ariel's secret wedding had had all the town buzzing. Now Miss Abigail's plans had the right of way, and the little town was stirred with a deeper emotion!

"To—for the land's sake! To where?"

"To London, Mrs. Pine. For two years."

"For the land's sake! Well, don't forget your friends in Clippersville, Gail."

"As if I could!"

"Next Thursday! Next *Thursday?* For heaven's sake! Why the rush?"

"Dick—Mr. Stebbins—has to sail for London on the fifteenth. And we have to have ten days or two weeks in New York."

"Well, you certainly have taken folks' breath away!"

"Not any more than mine, I assure you, Mrs. Brush."

"You'll be back in Clippersville some day."

"Oh, indeed I hope so!"

"When d'you leave the lib'ary, Gail?"

"To-morrow night."

"Well, I declare it won't seem like the same place without you!"

They were all so kind. Old associates in tears, old friends carrying armsful of brightly polished huckleberry and pungent chrysanthemums to the Lawrence house. Presents, presents, presents—everyone in town had to have a finger in Gail's new equipment.

In Müller's she looked at the incredibly smart ensemble: the tan silk blouse, the tobacco-brown coat with a great white fur collar.

"The tag seems to be gone, Mr. Müller. Not that I think it's—just my price."

"It is thirty dollars," said old Müller steadfastly. The saleswoman almost cried out. Even unsophisticated Gail looked bewildered.

"Thirty dollars!"

"Thirty."

She tried it on that night for the family, pulled down the rich little tobacco-brown hat over her eyes.

"You're stunning!" said Lily and Ariel.

"Gee, you're cute!" Sam and Phil said.

Dick said nothing.

The days were full of delights; in the long evenings she and Dick sat by the fire and planned.

"What keeps us in New York for ten days, Dick?"

"Oh, I have to see Mr. Leavitt, and we have to get you a winter coat—or maybe we could get that in London."

"All I know is," said Gail, "that when you say 'a London coat,' you *say* something!"

"But you'd need it on the steamer, you see."

"Dick, I assure you in all seriousness that I can't believe my ears!"

"It's going," he said slowly, with a rich content in his voice, "to be fun!"

"Imagine our paying for things in shillings and pence, Dick!"

It was an inexhaustibly diverting thought. Once she said wistfully, "Would any of Dickens's London be left, Dick, do you suppose? I mean all around Lincoln's Inn, where Traddles had all the girls, and down 'round the docks and bridges where Lizzie Hexam and her father rowed, and in the law courts where Snagsby bolted his bread and butter?"

He laughed at her tenderly.

"My darling, I don't know Dickens as you do!"

"I should love to see the old Marshalsea," she mused, "and Arthur Clenham's house, and the gate where they found Lady Dedlock!"

Old Miss Rountree, born in London, came especially to warn her. The Hyde Park neighborhood was the nice neighborhood, my dear. There were very nice flats in all those streets; the Stebbinses couldn't do better, unless they meant to go as far out as St. John's Wood. But they must keep away from the Pimlico district. These things were important at 'ome.

Mrs. Wibser, Lily's extraordinary mother, also had advice to impart.

"You might easily take it for sea-sickness, d'ye see? But there'll be a good doctor on board, and you look him up the first thing. He'll tell ye the difference. Not that there's anything to be afraid of, but it's as well to take care of yourself, from the beginning."

"I'm not one bit worried about *that*. What does worry me is that I might be the sort that never——"

"Well, you're not!" said the oracle firmly. "You're one that'll have to look out now, not to get all run down!"

"Honestly, Ma," Lily said, "your idea of conversation with a girl who's going to be married in two days simply gets me!"

Mrs. Wibser was undaunted. She instantly recalled the case of a girl who had mistaken a discomfort far more significant for sea-sickness, and who had died and been buried at sea. Lily and Gail laughed the tears into their eyes, the older woman could not see why.

"Havin' children's as natural as breathin'," she said indignantly. "They say the Indian women simply drop out of the march . . ."

"Do you know whom I'm going to miss like *everything,* Lil?" Gail asked in an undertone, after awhile.

"Phil?" suggested Phil's wife.

"Phil too, and of course the baby. But I meant Wiff-waff," said Gail. "He and I understand each other; I never dreamed that I could love a little boy as much as that!"

"He'll miss you, too," Lily said, tears in her bright sharp eyes. "But, my God, won't we all!" she added simply.

It was only Ariel, of them all, of all Clippersville, who could not share the excitement and pleasure of Gail Lawrence's marriage. Ariel had somehow lost her birthright of little-sistership; there had been no happy flurry of flowers, gifts, wedding frocks, and wedding plans for her; and she looked on at Gail's excitement and emotion with disillusioned, hard young eyes and a faint curl of the lip.

Sometimes Gail dragged herself from her own roseate absorption to try—as all her world had always tried—to cheer Ariel.

"Do you know anything about Manchester?"

"Manchester?"

"The New Jersey town where Van is, where you'll live?"

"Not much." Ariel's tone would be utterly dreary. "Van says there's a country club."

"That might be fun!"

"I don't imagine anything in New Jersey is fun. It sounds to me like a horribly jay place!"

"Maybe you'll have a baby, Ariel. That will keep you busy!"

"Maybe I won't," Ariel answered, setting her jaw firmly.

"Oh, darling—you love children."

"I know," Ariel conceded grudgingly, and was silent. "Men always get the best of everything!" she added resentfully.

"Well, as far as I can see," Gail said healthily, "Van is working hard on a rather dull job, and seems to be an immensely improved—" she altered the word—"developed young man!" she finished.

"Why should what a girl does be so much worse than what a man does!" Ariel said darkly, out of thought.

"Oh, darling, we can't go back to that!"

"I mean, why should a man be able to throw anything up to his wife, when he himself was in it—talked her into doing it?" Ariel demanded.

Gail flushed with distaste.

"I don't think a decent man would do that, Ariel!" she said warmly.

But words were no use. Twenty-one, beautiful, married to the man she had chosen, yet the secret of content was denied Ariel, and she could only look forward with apprehension, and backward with regret. The look in Dick's eyes when he came to steal a few words with his promised wife was a sealed book to Ariel, as was the light that shone on Gail's face as she went to meet him. There had been no mystery, no waiting, no fragrance and glory to Ariel's surrender—excited, reckless, their sudden desire knowing no law, their breath stained with food and drink and cigarettes, she and Van had possessed each other casually, without premeditation, unashamed and unfearing before the hour that found them in each other's arms; ashamed and fearful forever afterward.

Ariel tried to feel contempt for Gail, so innocent, so awed, so trembling with love and faith at the door of the temple. Ariel was but twenty-one, but life had hardened her; she had aged ten years in the last three. Nothing thrilled Ariel now, no promises rang true in her ears, no prospect allured her. And Gail at twenty-seven, Gail who wrote stories and handled unmanageable little boys and novel-loving old ladies so expertly—Gail was only a child, going in utter unknowingness to her bridal night. To Gail men could still be fine, good, worthy of trust and love; to Gail marriage and motherhood would be the very crown of life.

When Gail and Dick sat before the fire in the late evenings, and when Ariel, reading in the next room or loitering discontentedly up to bed, heard their low voices, their low laughter, she tried to despise them.

But after all it was hard to despise beauty and strength and hope; it was hard to despise the prospect that embraced travel and new cities, and the crossing of the great ocean. Above all, it was hard to despise love, and how these two loved each other!

Gail's new cards came home: "Mrs. Richard Alden Stebbins." Gail's new trunk came home, with a plain little "A. L. S." lettered on the blue strip that encircled it.

"Why the blue stripe, Dick?"

"Willoughby gave me that idea. We'll be traveling, off and on. We'll go over to Paris for Christmas, maybe. And it helps you pick out your baggage."

"Oh, thrills!" sang Gail.

"But listen to me, Dicky," she said, on the afternoon before the great day itself. "Mark me well. If you were running this ranch as your father did, and if you and I were moving in here to-morrow, I'd be just as happy. I'd be just as happy! I'd bake you biscuits and sweep out this old kitchen."

On a quiet, late October afternoon they were walking about the old place that was presently to be Sam's home. Sam not only had theories about farming, but he had an eye on pretty Beth Tait who taught the kindergarten grades. He, Gail, and Dick wandered through the gaunt, deserted farmhouse that still smelled of apples and rotting wood, and through the sweet-scented barns and stables.

"I believe you would!" Dick said.

Sam had left them alone for a minute in the kitchen. It held the homely air of a place in which hard living—loving, hating, eating, grieving, and rejoicing—had had their way for generations. The old stove had been polished thin; lamps still stood crookedly in the old brass brackets. Two empty flower pots careened on the window sill.

"How different it would be!" Gail said.

"Well, this was home to me, you know. I learned to read in this kitchen. My whole childhood was right in this yard."

"If Beth and Sam make a go of it we'll come back some day!"

"We'll come back anyway, Gail."

They stepped into the dooryard, and looked up at the trees from which the leaves were drifting, and Dick showed her his initials cut clumsily into the great wealed bole of a pepper tree. The girl stooped and touched her lips to them.

"Do you know what that is, Dick?" she asked, straightening up with eyes full of love and laughter. "That's love, dear. The love of a woman for a man!"

"The miracle," he said, kissing the glowing face under the tawny mop.

On the way home they stopped at the graveyard, and Gail knelt, dry-eyed and thoughtful, at Edith's little stone, and touched its carved inscription with her finger tips.

" 'Blessed are the pure in spirit, for they shall see God,' " she read. And all that evening, the last of her girlhood, she thought of Edith.

"My darling, if you could share this! You'd love it so! Packing the trunk—you'd have so many little tricks, out of the backs of magazines! You'd come to visit us, maybe, in London, and we'd prowl around together—in the Strand and in Charing Cross Road. . . . You'd be the first to touch my baby—when he comes."

The evening was one long dream, a dream that blended into the dreams of the short night, when she slept lightly, but sweetly, mingling waking thoughts with happy, confused journeys into the unreal.

She thought of the old house whose winter shadows rose about her and below her and above her; the stately old ugly rooms, the books and books and books, on the shelves and lying face downward on the chairs and stuck between the railings of the winding stairway. She thought of her poetic mother, dying, with innocent little golden-headed Ariel on her arm, and of motherless childhood days when she and Edith had whispered of school affairs, going off to sleep, and had played mud pies and flower ladies out in the old garden during the long vacations.

Then Papa off to the war, as became a Lawrence and a patriot, and then the strange sense of suddenly growing up, of responsibility, that had come with the news of Papa's death and her first job.

Poverty, hard work, discouragement, ignorance—how these shadows had darkened about the Lawrence children! The old house shabbier and poorer, Ariel unmanageable, Sam playing hooky, Phil beginning to run with the Wibser girl, and never any money, any beauty, any leisure, any young pleasure for any of them!

She and Edith had philosophized, had read books and taken walks, had refused the spurious coin when the genuine had failed them. But Ariel had fluttered straight toward the flame—desperately determined to force from the world what the world would not give.

Winter nights, buttering pudding dishes, shuddering up to bed with three books and one hot-water bottle. Summer Sundays, dull, eventless, with everyone else but the Lawrences managing to get pretty frocks, motor trips, swimming, tennis.

Edith always steadfast, faithful, coming to the library to help stack books, planning supper in the side garden, with raspberries and iced tea. But Ariel in open rebellion, and Gail not much better.

She remembered the day when Van Murchison came suddenly back into her life, and when fun, excitement, visits, and frocks had seemed within reach. Unsatisfactory, flippant, giddy as he had been, she had accepted him, she had determined indeed to marry him should the chance be offered her—marry him to escape.

Gail, dreaming of all this on her wedding eve, trembled with a sudden chill in the darkness and solitude of her own big chamber. She would have taken Van to escape—what?

Well, this. This that she had to-night. Her friends, her background, her family, Phil and Lily and the children, all the beauty and dignity of home. To escape from her work, her beloved sheets of yellow paper, her green fountain pen. To escape from Dick, and London, and all the glowing future!

Poor little Ariel had escaped—escaped from life. She had shut herself into the jail of her own dissatisfied heart, and there she would be for a long time to come, perhaps forever.

Gail turned and looked at her, sleeping. A bright autumn moon was shining over Clippersville, and there was a silvery glow in the big upper room. Gail could see the aureole of her sister's fair hair, and the dark lashes on her cheek. But even in her sleep Ariel's face wore a faintly discontented look, and she sighed impatiently, scornfully—Ariel to the end.

Then it was morning, and there was no more time for dreams. The house was astir in the foggy dawn; Lily, with her hair in curling kids, running frantically about the kitchen, little boys stumbling to and fro, Sam grinning over his early cup of coffee, Phil rushing off to work with all sorts of commissions and threats sounding in his ears.

Gail appeared in the kitchen, rosy and tousled, just before Phil went.

"You'll be back early, Phil dearest?"

"Oh, Lord, I'll be here by ten!"

"Mrs. Bates wants to know if you'd rather have chicken or lettuce sandwiches, Gail!"

"The boy for the trunks is here, Gail."

"There's someone we forgot, after all!" This was Phil, departing.

"Oh, good heavens, Phil, who? Maybe I could telephone."

"The Formaldehydes!" Phil called over his shoulder.

"Gail—look at the roses."

"Gail—Miss Wells wants to bring her mother upstairs to see you in your wedding dress. She says her mother might have a stroke if she——"

"Listen, all the food goes here, see?—in this closet. Just stack it there, and while we're at church Mrs. Wiggin and Betsey are going to sort everything out."

"Wiff-waff, if you would *eat* it, and let me wash the bowl!"

"Here are the cakes from Lou. Will you look at the ten-layer cake!"

"Well, she wanted to come downstairs, too, the darling, and see what was going on, and help get her Aunt Gail married."

"Oh, look, fruit punch, two pails of it. Oh, that's marvelous! Look—two pails of it. Two pails of fruit punch, Lily, so that's all right!"

"Give me the baby," Ariel said. She sat holding the soft little drowsy armful.

"You look real cute with a baby, Mis' Murchison!" said Lily's mother.

"Mama, will you lay off?" Lily demanded patiently. But Ariel only laughed. She was her sweetest, her gentlest self, on this busy morning. She had seemed to keep rather near Gail, and when the clock had raced as far as eleven o'clock, and Gail outwardly calm, inwardly madly agitated, went upstairs for the actual donning of the wedding dress, Ariel went too, still carrying the sleeping baby.

The big bedroom was a scene of mad confusion;

Mary Keats was on her knees, finishing the packing, and holding everything up for Gail's approval before she laid it away.

"Gail, got stockings out for your traveling suit?"

"Two pairs, darling! I can wear a different color on each leg!"

"Got something blue?"

"Look at that hair curl!"

"Don't touch it, Gail! It's perfectly lovely just the way it is!"

The white silk gown slipped over her head; she was all in white. It was simple white, with a small pull-down hat instead of a veil, and practical shoes. Yet they who loved her thought they had never seen Gail look so lovely as she did now. Square-shouldered, straight, steady-eyed, she looked at herself in the old dim mirror that had reflected all the moods of her girlhood, and laughed contentedly.

"Somehow I can't feel that I'm getting married!"

The others straggled away, Lily taking her baby. Ariel was alone with her sister. Suddenly she came close, and encircled the sweetness and whiteness and glory that were Gail with her slender arms.

"Just one thing, Gail. I'm going on to Chicago tomorrow to meet Van, and I'm going—I'm going to be different, Gail. I'm going to—to make a go of it, do you understand? I'll be the nicest woman in the country club, I'll have a little girl baby that Van will adore, I'll study French and keep house—honest I will, Gail!"

It was complete surrender. Gail caught her little sister to her in the first real embrace they had known since Ariel had come back. Both their faces were wet.

Then Gail had to wipe her cheeks carefully and powder them again, and go downstairs to join the others, and to walk around the corner and across the tree-shaded street to Saint Mark's.

The autumn day was as clear and sweet as spring water, the sky deep blue, the noontime air scented with faint odors of the dying summer; odors of yellowed foliage, heavy dews on dry golden grass, tar-weed, apples. There had been recent rains; brush fires in the orchards were smoking through packed wet leaves.

There were persons on the sidewalk—kindly persons who said, "Good luck, Miss Lawrence!" There were more clustered on the church steps, and she walked between them at her brother's side. Lyddy White, at the organ, was so excited that she forgot to begin the wedding march until the bride was halfway up the aisle; then it did begin, convulsively and rapidly, and there was a breath of laughter through the packed church.

They were all there: old friends, old neighbors, library acquaintances, Edith's associates from Müller's, the butcher and his wife, the Foster girls from the post office—everyone. She felt their love about her like a protecting great wall as she went slowly up the aisle and saw Dick waiting.

Wolfe and Miles and Wiff-waff had been shepherded into a pew, and Lily, flushed and weary, was sitting there with little Gail restless and hot in her arms; Sam looked oddly grown-up in his new suit, standing beside Dick. And Dick looked—just Dick, big and lean and homely and kind, stooping down a little beside the shorter Sam, watching Gail, catching her eye as she looked at him. And at the sight of him Gail forgot everything else except that after this packed and flurried and extraordinarily emotional morning she was really getting married.

They smiled at each other. Gail's cold right hand caught at his left, and during the little ceremony their fingers were linked.

Afterward, when they were home again and the congratulatory crowds were surging about them, Dick went to the foot of the stairs to meet her as she came down hatted and coated for the trip. Tears and laughter had been so mingled on her wedding day that he thought she looked more like a blue-eyed child than ever: bewildered, grateful, touched, happy.

"When we used to play 'round the old ranch together, twenty years ago, we didn't see this coming at the end, did we, Gail?" Dick said, as he caught her hand for the run to the waiting motor car.

"At the end!" she echoed, with a swift, shocked, laughing glance. "Dick, Dick, this is only the beginning! Don't forget that I'm one of the Lucky Lawrences!"

THE END